



# THEIR TURN

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Giving students  
a chance to be  
involved in changing  
education—one  
classroom at a time.

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In 2007, the Boston Public Schools system was looking for a new system to measure teacher effectiveness and accountability. Who better to ask than the students? At least, that's what the students thought.

Members of the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC)—composed of two student representatives from each high school within the Boston Public Schools system—proposed to the Boston School Committee that teacher evaluations include student feedback. After all, they argued, who better to provide perspective than the students who spend hours upon hours a week in their classrooms?

BSAC developed a feedback form and presented it to the school committee for consideration. Students would fill out the forms anonymously, and the forms would be sent to the appropriate teachers. The hope was that the teachers would take the student feedback to heart and modify their instruction accordingly.

The school committee accepted the students' proposal, which gave the students a tremendous sense of pride. But they didn't stop there; the BSAC students wanted to be taken more seriously. So, they launched a campaign to make student feedback a formal part of teacher evaluations not only in Boston but also in the entire state of Massachusetts. The students held a rally to garner broader support and began lobbying the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Their message: "We are the ones in the classroom—ask us."





In June 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Education voted to make student feedback a mandatory component of educator evaluations across the state. “Students can do something,” says student Dan Chu. “We are not powerless and we can fight for what we believe.”

### Giving Students a Voice

BSAC is a driving force in shaping education in the city and across the state. Members attend meetings twice a month to discuss what’s going on at their schools, what projects they want to tackle, and how they can make a difference in their classrooms. They also advise the Boston School Committee—the school system’s governing body—about issues such as cell phone policies, tardy policies, and bullying. And, they are responsible for keeping their home schools informed about BSAC and school committee activities.

The BSAC Steering Committee, the general membership, is the voice of students, representing every high school in the city. Some members are involved in their student governments and some are not. Some students serve for all four years and others serve for one or two years at a time.

The BSAC Working Group is the driving force behind BSAC’s reform efforts. This core group of 10 students, elected by the general membership, plans, directs, and supports BSAC’s advocacy work on behalf of Boston’s students. They run meetings,

develop campaigns, monitor BSAC projects, and ensure open communication with school and district leaders. Working group members typically work 5–10 hours per week on their school reform efforts.

The Office of Family and Student Engagement for Boston Public Schools coordinates BSAC. One of its activities is to provide workshops for all BSAC members so they can hone their skills in community organizing, advocacy, power mapping, project and event planning, and public speaking. In addition, the office sponsors an overnight leadership retreat for working group members at the beginning of the school year.

Those are all skills that serve students long after they graduate. According to Aisha Dhubow, “BSAC is the only reason I am a student leader. It helped me learn teamwork and how to take criticism.”

### Students in Action

BSAC students help guide all areas of education in Boston public schools including instruction, discipline, and hiring teachers. In addition to the teacher evaluation policy, they have been active in the following projects:

**Homework Task Force.** BSAC students were part of a formal homework task force, along with teachers and staff members from the superintendent’s office, to establish a policy to increase

## TAKING THEIR TURN

How can schools involve students in meaningful education reform? Youth On Board offers the following suggestions that go beyond advisory boards and task forces:

### Hiring Team

Students can help hire new teachers and staff members. Although they don't have the final say on hiring decisions, who better than students to rate a candidate's abilities to relate to students?

### Instructional Leadership Team

Some schools involve students on their instructional leadership teams. These teams plan professional

development activities, coordinate instructional strategies and interventions, and analyze assessment data. Students can be full, participating members of instructional leadership teams or attend meetings on specific topics.

### Student Advocates

Who better to advocate for student needs and wants than students themselves? Students can be powerful change agents by attending committee meetings, district meetings, and even community meetings.

For more information visit the Youth on Board website at [www.youthonboard.org](http://www.youthonboard.org)

the quality of homework and access to school resources. BSAC's recommendations included starting homework clubs with peer leaders, setting aside class time to explain the night's homework assignments, scheduling professional development time for teachers to focus on factors that affect students' completion of homework, and extending library hours at schools.

Their recommendations were based on responses to student surveys and input from elementary, middle, and high school teachers.

**Teacher Hiring Process.** The goals of this project are to increase student representation on school site councils and to include students on each school's personnel subcommittee. The Boston Teachers Union fully supports the project, which is vital to its success.

**Code of Conduct.** Students and parents played an integral role in revising the Code of Conduct for Boston Public Schools. Students and parents now serve on an advisory committee to review implementation of the code in the city's schools. The leadership, communication, and advocacy skills they learn by participating in BSAC are skills that will benefit students long after they graduate.

"I really enjoyed BSAC during my high school years and I have incorporated many valuable qualities in college and beyond," says BSAC alum Eleni Saradis. "I especially loved working with staff and peers where we dedicated our time and efforts to make positive changes for BPS high schools."

The Boston Student Advisory Council is a testament to all that students can and should have a voice in school reform.

### Beyond Boston

Many school systems are engaging students in their school reform efforts. For example, several districts have established a Superintendent's Student Advisory Council (SuperSAC). These groups typically include at least one representative from each secondary school in the district and are focused on providing

student perspective and input about what's going on in the schools and classrooms.

In Portland, OR, the SuperSAC meets weekly and has taken on issues such as class size, arts programs, state funding, alcohol policies, and commercialism in the schools. SuperSAC members meet regularly with district officials to share their ideas and concerns.

Anne Arundel County Public Schools in Maryland have included a student member on the board of education since 1975. The student, a high school senior, votes on all issues, including personnel, instruction, and finance. In addition, county students participate on every advisory, curriculum, and study committee. As many as 5 students serve on 10-person state-mandated school improvement teams.

Several education reform organizations also promote students as valuable voices in school reform. For example, Critical Exposure ([www.criticalexposure.org](http://www.criticalexposure.org)) is a nonprofit organization that teaches youth to use photography to become effective advocates for school reform and social change. Students have documented inadequate school facilities, poor school nutrition, teen pregnancy, youth homelessness and unemployment, and the causes and consequences of dropping out of school.

According to the group, students "have contributed their images and stories to successful campaigns for more than \$400 million in additional funding for public schools."

### Ask the Experts

As the primary stakeholders in education, students have a lot to say about their education and we would be wise to listen to them. When students have a voice in their own education, they are empowered to not only take charge of their own learning but also to become involved in making their community and the world a better place. ■

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