

Isabela Villarreal  
333 SE 2nd Ave.  
Portland, OR 97214  
RE: Support SB 776



March 11, 2021

Chair and Majority Leader Wagner, Vice Chair Girod, and members of the committee,

My name is Isabela Villarreal and I am the Policy and Communications Manager at Next Up Action Fund, formerly known as the Bus Project. Our mission is to build political power with diverse young people to achieve a more just and equitable Oregon. As an organization that builds political power and strong, effective leadership pipelines for young people, our work and our communities are greatly impacted by an accessible and representative democracy. Today we're here in strong support of SB 776 which would allow 16 and 17-year-olds to participate in school board elections.

Every day, school board members make incredibly important decisions that directly impact the lives of students. Yet, most high school students don't get to determine who is elected. The choice to support access to students voting on school boards is a straightforward one. Students should be able to help determine who is making decisions about their schools, which impact their everyday lives. Today, you'll hear many students and school board members discuss why it's critical that students can hold school board members accountable so that school districts are more student-centered in their efforts and responsive to the needs and demands of students.

With my time I would like to underscore something important: this bill just makes sense for our democracy. I'll admit that when I first heard about lowering the voting age to 16, I was extremely hesitant. It was only after I listened to the numerous reasons that we'll outline today that I understood why 16 and 17-year olds are not only ready to vote but deserve to have a say in their futures, especially when it is in regards to school district elections. We have an incredible opportunity with SB 776 to improve voter turnout, ensure schools are responsive to students, spur civic engagement, and encourage effective civic education.

This can seem like a big step, but it shouldn't be scary. This past year, during the 2020 general election, Oakland voters passed a measure that will allow students that are at least 16 years old to vote in Oakland Unified School District school board elections.

I urge you to see this as a wonderful opportunity to make Oregon a leader in civic engagement for young people. Voting on issues that directly impact their lives - prepares students to participate in democracy. Lessons on civic engagement become real when paired with concrete opportunities to exercise political power and responsibility, especially when they can have a say in who is making decisions about their school. By allowing students to vote in school board elections we would become a leader in the nation for creating a meaningful and tangible opportunity for young people to play a role in shaping our democracy.

Additionally, Oregon is well equipped to have a smooth transition to allowing 16 and 17-year-olds to participate in school board elections due to our robust voter pre-registration policy that has already registered over 196 thousand young Oregonians.

As a leader in the country for our innovation towards accessible and equitable elections, I strongly urge that you support the voices of students by passing the common-sense legislation, SB 776.

Thank you,

Isabela Villarreal  
Policy and Communications Manager, Next Up Action Fund