

**Submitter:** Austin Sumpter

**Committee:** House Committee On Rules

**Measure, Appointment or Topic:** Support House Bill 3012

**Submit Testimony [here](#) by March 3rd at 8am**

Chair Bowman, Vice Chair Drazan, Vice Chair Pham and esteemed members of the House Committee on Rules,

My name is Austin Sumpter, and I live in Canby, which happens to be within Vice Chair Drazan's house district. I am writing to testify in strong support of the Student Voice and Democracy Act, also known as House Bill 3012, which will allow registered 16- and 17-year-olds to cast votes in local school board elections, finally giving these students a voice in their education and strengthening our democracy.

It should come as no surprise to some, including me, how influential a school board is in deciding policies, whether it's the curricula the students are taught or even the books they are able to read. The 2023 efforts by the Canby School District to ban as many as 38 books from the shelves left many appalled. The news stories were disheartening. As an alumnus of Canby High School, I could not believe that my high school was becoming the latest example of efforts to indoctrinate students via book bans. At the same time, I was moved by the students protesting the school board's bans, and I did my part by electing members who drastically reduced the scope of the ban to just one book. But while I was able to make a change for those students, I had long since graduated. They were to face the brunt but were powerless to stop it beyond protests and persuasion.

House Bill 3012 would empower 16- and 17-year-olds to play a role in how their school boards influence their education. Already, people of these ages are able to be tasked with responsibilities much harder and even more dangerous than casting a vote. We trust people of these ages to be licensed drivers and to share the road with us. We trust people of these ages to hold jobs within the workplace as they earn money and work experience. And we even expect people of

these ages to be held to account if they commit crimes. Yet the fact they cannot have any kind of say in immediate decisions concerning their education is a deep injustice on our part. Students spend more time in the classroom than any of us adults do and the decisions of their school board will always touch them whereas it's all trivial to us adults who vote on them but have since moved on from their influence. If students are dissatisfied with their school board, they shouldn't be told to just "suck it up" or "deal with it"; they should be able to shape the board so that they can get the resources they need to best succeed. If we adults get to vote in elections that affect our lives, 16- and 17-year-olds should get a stake in elections that will directly impact them.

On top of finally granting those younger people a say in elections, this bill would also allow younger generations the opportunity to become more engaged with the political process as a whole. In today's age of social media and digitization, more and more young people are taking an interest in politics. And with issues ranging from gun violence to the climate crisis to voting rights and more, being able to start at an early age can have long-term benefits. Sixteen and 17-year-old kids are just as affluent and engaged in politics as 18-year-olds, who were similarly disenfranchised from elections until the 26th Amendment was ratified. If able to start with the school board-level, these kids will allow them to create a beneficial habit of lifelong voting in elections. It would boost civic engagement as students would be allowed to elect their preferred candidates to shape their schools' agendas, and eventually create a path to become more engaged in shaping the world around them each election. If not choosing a career in the political field, they can at least get a better sense of what they stand for and how they can reach out to others on issues that matter to them. In all, extending this right to 16- and 17-year-olds will strengthen democracy in Oregon as school boards – long considered the lowest of levels – will start to become more reflective and responsive to the young minds of today and tomorrow, and will sow the seeds for a more engaged and reflective electorate in higher levels of government, too.

Allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections is *not* radical. It's nothing like a corrupt executive defying court orders to impose their cruel will, nor is it like firing tens of thousands of workers or berating the leader of an ally. If we can trust 16-and 17-year-olds to drive cars and to hold jobs, we can and should trust them to mark a ballot and make political decisions for themselves. At a time where voting rights are facing extreme threats from the federal government, Oregon has an opportunity to set an example for something better, especially while we are in the "judicial phase" of resisting American fascism. If the kids aren't alright, then let's give them the tools they need to make things better. I urge you to pass House Bill 3012 out of committee and to let this bill make its way through the Legislature.

Thank you,

Austin Sumpter