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OAKLAND NEWS

Oakland students may get to vote for school board members

A November ballot measure to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school district elections would make Oakland the fifth U.S. city to lower its voting age.

By Ashley McBride, May 20, 2020, 4:10 p.m.



17-year-old Oakland Tech High School student Malia Liao is working to change the voting age for school district elections. Photo: Pete Rosos

Oakland voters will decide in November whether or not to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in school board elections.

The Oakland City Council [voted unanimously on Tuesday](#) to place a measure on the fall ballot extending the voting franchise to students. The council's decision was the culmination of a months-long campaign by student leaders to enable young people to have greater influence over the Oakland Unified School District's board. If approved by voters in November, Oakland would join a handful of other cities across the country, including Berkeley, that allow teens to help pick school district leaders.

Students said the campaign was driven by their desire to hold school board leaders accountable for decisions affecting their education.

“We saw the teachers’ strike as kind of like an eye-opener to see how our issues weren’t met, our needs weren’t met,” said Malia Liao, a junior at Oakland Technical High School. “We decided to push this forward so that our school board is responsive to the needs of students.”

Liao said that during [the strike last spring](#), students stood with their teachers on picket lines and pleaded with district officials to keep schools open and preserve important programs amidst budget cuts. Now students hope to make their voices heard at the ballot box.

The idea of expanding the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds first arose at a student retreat last September for OUSD’s [All City Council](#), the student union that convenes leaders from across district schools. At the time, students were fresh off a win in securing millions for the [reinstated free supper program](#) offered by the school district. But student leaders were still frustrated that their only recourse for instigating change was appealing to elected officials at board meetings.



“There are some things that I feel all students should have easy access to.” 16-year-old Oakland Tech High School student Jermesha Hall wants to see the voting age changed for school board elections. Photo: Pete Rosos

Students were tired of just speaking to the OUSD board members during public comment periods and not really feeling heard, said Lukas Brekke-Miesner, the executive director of Oakland Kids First, an organization that helps students organize and advocate for themselves. Students wanted a more direct way to influence policy.

OUSD students were also impressed with the work of [Tyler Okeke](#), a student in the Los Angeles Unified School District who was making waves by advocating for student enfranchisement. Okeke authored a proposal directing the LAUSD superintendent to explore the implications of lowering the voting age to 16.

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“At the end of the retreat, students wanted to explore youth voting on school board elections,” said Denilson Garibo, a senior at Oakland High School who currently serves as one of two student directors on the school board, a symbolic position that does not have voting power.

Over the past several months, OUSD students held voter education workshops, registered teen voters and met with Oakland City Council members to draw up the resolution. It was sponsored by City Council President Rebecca Kaplan and received support from several school board members, the Oakland Education Association and Mayor Libby Schaaf.

However, while the resolution received broad support, some have expressed concerns that teenagers aren’t knowledgeable enough to vote, or that they could be easily misled by deceptive campaigns.

“If we are able to balance our schoolwork, providing for our families, drive, and work, we should have the right to vote for things we feel are unjust in our school system.”

OUSD District 6 Director Shanthi Gonzales felt that with more time, the proposal could have been refined.

“The main thing is that there’s no plan and no resources devoted to educating student voters to make sure they can be informed voters when this legislation is enacted,” Gonzales said. Even adults have difficulty figuring out the nuances of board elections, campaigns and the organizations that fund them, and allowing teens to vote without a plan or resources to educate them could be irresponsible, Gonzales said.

The students who successfully campaigned for the City Council to place the measure on the ballot said that they are mature enough for civic engagement and have a track record of making positive changes.

“I have experienced not having a teacher present and not having extra support after school or in class,” Oakland Technical High School student Jermesha Hall told the Oakland City Council

during yesterday's meeting. "There are some things that I feel all students should have easy access to. I don't want future students to feel like they are powerless in that way."

"If we are able to balance our schoolwork, providing for our families, drive, and work," added Hall, "we should have the right to vote for things we feel are unjust in our school system."

Berkeley's student voting resolution passed with 70% of the vote in 2016 [but has yet to be implemented](#). That measure included a stipulation that no city funds be used to enact it, leaving Berkeley Unified School District with the bill. Berkeley officials are also debating other issues, including whether to print separate ballots for teens so they don't vote in other races, and determining whether they can vote by mail.

San Francisco supervisors are also considering [an even broader proposal](#) to lower the voting age to

16 for all local elections.

If Oakland voters approve this measure, students hope that they'll be able to vote in the 2022 school board elections.

"Since I sit on the board of education, I get to hear comments from the community every time they speak at the Zoom meetings," said Garibo, the Oakland High senior, referring to the virtual meetings the board has held during the pandemic. "Just hearing them recognizing our hard work every chance they get and supporting it really keeps us motivated as students to push harder. We know the community is looking at us for that change and we want to create that change."

*Ashley McBride reports on education equity for Berkeleyside's forthcoming Oakland newsroom.
Email: ashley@berkeleyside.com.*