

Getting young people involved in local government should be a high priority for local and state leadership. Not only can it benefit town's, but larger communities and school districts as well. Being the son of a father who is chairperson in the town where we reside, and a mother who is clerk for a neighboring town, I've often heard my parents talk about how they wish more well-meaning people would choose to run for local boards, and not just those who, as they put it, "have an ax to grind." Unfortunately, since this type of public service is often considered a thankless job, it doesn't attract many, and when it does, it tends to be one-issue candidates. It's not very common for people to decide to run for a local governing body after spending a few years attending meetings regularly, unless of course, they were there to complain about something. Some will even get their name on the ballot before ever attending a single meeting of the board they seek a seat on.

From what I can tell, what keeps a lot of people on boards longer than originally planned is the fear that either nobody will take their place, or those who are willing to take their place are not running for the right reasons. Once you've put your time and effort into something, you want to leave it in good hands. So engaging more young people isn't just a good idea, it's crucial if town leaders want to have potential candidates ready, willing, able and actually educated in town government to take over for them when they decide to step away from board service. However, it's important to recognize that for most people, an interest in local government does not come naturally, especially young people. So, opportunities for engagement are limited unless they carry a motivating factor, which is why partnering with school districts would help tremendously.

My first idea, and that which would provide the most opportunity in terms of how many students could participate, would be to have student attendance at local board meetings count as credit (even partial) toward community service hours already required for high school graduation. Of course, those students couldn't just sit in the back, chat with their friends or stare

at their electronic devices. Both town and school leadership would want to be sure credit is only given to those who are taking it seriously, and that means someone present at the meeting would need to be watching and be willing to vouch for the student's respectful attendance. However, the town officials I personally know would be more than happy to do this if it meant more young people in their community were paying attention to how town business is actually conducted

The second idea I'd like to share is that of summer internships or job-shadowing at the town hall. This could potentially accompany some sort of half-credit social studies course specific to local governments and would require a lot of coordination with the school district, especially upon the program's inception. Even on a part-time basis though, and even if they are not shadowing actual board members, spending a few months working with a town clerk, town treasurer or town administrator could provide an incredible amount of insight on how town government works.

Another way to engage youth would be to create honorary student board member positions that could be appointed as one-year terms. Such positions could be created on committees or subcommittees as well. Student board/committee members would get the same meeting materials and participate in discussions just like other members, but would not have voting privileges. Having young people engaged in the meetings could lengthen them due to the amount of review and/or educational conversations it could require to bring the student(s) up to speed on things beyond their current knowledge. But the time and patience of the other members to make the situation successful should be considered an investment in the future of the town.

Since each town could likely only accommodate a few students each year if implementing internships or student board member initiatives, school credit for these types of

opportunities might be more difficult to accomplish. However, there could certainly still be possibilities for marketing such opportunities to students through the districts and local news. Town leadership might even consider hosting an open house each year geared toward high school and college students where students could enjoy some free food and refreshments while town leaders present the opportunities available. These events could be a great time to remind students that things like, "Student Appointee to the Town Board" or "Municipal Clerk Internship" would look great on any college application or future resume.

For towns unable to parlay these opportunities into some sort of school credit, I would suggest town boards consider whether improved engagement with the young people in their community, and the potential of better-prepared local leaders in the future, would be worth accommodating such opportunities with a modest amount of funding in the town's annual budget. Small stipends for roles that require a larger time commitment or a higher level of responsibility should be considered if a student is providing value to the town.

While the opportunities I've proposed won't necessarily turn all engaged students into future town board members as they become young adults, the time spent learning about it could at least help them distinguish fact from fiction when they hear rumblings in their community later in life. Perhaps, when the opportunity arises, they'll help to dispel any false assumptions of their neighbors by sharing their own knowledge of how local government actually works. At a minimum, it will hopefully make them understand the true responsibilities of town officials, and instill in them an appreciation for those who serve, which can only help to encourage a more respectful approach and dialogue, should they ever have a concern to voice to their local officials in the future.