Spotlighting a Best Practice:
Student Voters and Representation in Montgomery County (MD)

INTRODUCTION

The Board of Education of Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland began its Student Member of the Board (SMOB) program in 1978. The SMOB is a high school student in Montgomery County who is elected by all high and middle school students (6th through 12th grade) in the county, using the same voting equipment the county uses for its federal and state elections. High school student leaders narrow the number of SMOB candidates to two candidates to face student voters, and the candidates then publicize their resumes and take part in an aired question and answer session viewed by student voters. The SMOB holds his or her position for one year. That means Montgomery County Public School students who attend county schools from 6th through 12th grade have had a chance to vote in six elections by the time they graduate, using the exact same voting equipment used for all countywide elections.

FairVote summer associate Rebecca Guterman, a recent graduate of Montgomery County's Blair High School, recently spoke with Tim Hwang, the SMOB for the 2009-2010 year, about his experience and the history of the SMOB program.

How did the SMOB program get started and when?

A proposal to create a student seat on the Montgomery County Board of Education first surfaced in 1975. In 1977 the Maryland General Assembly amended Section 3-701 of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of the Public General Laws of Maryland to create a nonvoting student seat on the Board of Education. Blair Lee, the Acting Governor, signed the legislation in the spring of that year and the first student, David Naimon (Northwood High School) was elected by a representational assembly in the spring of 1978; he assumed his duties on July 1, 1978.

The law provides that MCR (the county-wide student government made up of student government representatives from every high school in Montgomery County) and the Board of Education will mutually agree on an election procedure, administered by MCR. The Special Election Committee was created to manage the process. The first four student members of the board (SMOB) were selected at a convention of student leaders. Each of our secondary schools elected delegates who attended a one-day convention. The candidates made presentations and participated in a series of question and answer sessions, and sequential balloting resulted in the identification of the student who would serve the one-year term.

In 1982, the Board of Education and MCR agreed on a modified direct election procedure that is still used today. The process that was initiated with the election of the fifth student Board member (Kurt Hirsch - Walt Whitman High School) provides that if more than two eligible students file for the office there will be a convention of student leaders convened for the purpose of reducing the field candidates to two. Once the finalists are identified there is a designated campaign period. In the spring, generally during the last week in April, all students in middle school through grade 12 have the opportunity to vote. The Special Election Committee publishes a voter's guide that is distributed to all schools and it produces a video program, "Meet the Candidates" which is shown to all students prior to the election.

During the 1989 session of the Maryland General Assembly, Section 3-701 was again amended and established a limited vote for the student member. The twelfth student member (Alison Serino - Springbrook High School) was the first one to exercise the limited vote. The vote of the SMOB is not counted on budget items, negative personnel matters, school closings/openings, and boundary changes, but is cast in nearly all of board votes.

What is the purpose of the SMOB?

The SMOB is an informed student voice on the Board of Education. He/She provides the student perspective to all school board decisions and provides an "on-the-ground" perspective to the policy and budget discussions. They also convey the views and interests of the student body to decision making authorities and ensure that their voices are balanced alongside other interests (parents, unions, etc). Many people say that the student member's job is to represent the student. While this statement is true, it is also the student member's job to represent every county resident. He or she needs to be just

as considerate of parents, community members and organizations, businesses, and the unions as is any adult member. Just as true of all members of the board, the student member needs to consider all information and the impact of his/her vote on the issue at hand.

What are the rights and responsibilities of the SMOB?

The SMOB must attend all meetings, represent the student body at various community events, and make sure that student voice is sufficiently heard. They have a right to be an equal member of the Board on all discussions, whether they can vote or not. The SMOB is responsible for attending all full Board meetings and all meeting of the standing committee(s) to which he or she is assigned. The student member must also attend other Board functions such as: hearings on student expulsions, forums on Strategic Planning, boundary hearings, and meetings with student and parent groups, along with the unions, County Council, and Montgomery County Delegation to the General Assembly. There is literally an event or meeting to go to every single day if a Board member were so inclined. Oftentimes, individual Board members are needed to represent the entire Board of Education at various community functions and press conferences. If you don't keep a detailed, written schedule now, you will need to during your term.

How did you get elected? What is that process like?

Any student in 10th or 11th grade may file for candidacy. In early spring, a convention of Middle School and High School student leaders meet and they see a live debate between all the candidates. Candidates give speeches and answer questions to the convention. The convention narrows the field down to two and sends the two candidates to a direct election by the general student body.

When I ran, there were 200 students at the convention. We fielded questions from a committee from MCR, and then answered questions straight from the convention itself after giving speeches. The election requires most candidates to use their campaign savvy to campaign to voters online, in schools, etc, answering questions and making a platform. Essentially, we have to reach out to students, our constituents, just like any other Board Member.

Why did you want to be the SMOB?

As cliché as this sounds, I wanted to become SMOB to give a voice to the students. Students were neglected and shut out of decision-making processes and I wanted to be able to bridge the gap between students and their decision-making authorities.

What have you done in your time as SMOB? What were your goals and did you meet them?

I fought hard for a budget with as little cuts as possible. I created a taskforce to look at the ways student engagement could fight against things like poverty, civic involvement,

etc. I allowed for the use of cell phones during lunches. I fought hard to expand the voting rights of the student member. I lobbied heavily in Annapolis to expand the voting rights. The provision failed by one vote in the Senate. I eliminated the unfair LC Policy and fought hard to increase the use of technology in classrooms. And I tried to bridge the communication gap with students through a new program called SMOB 2.0.

What was the most challenging part of the job?

The hardest part of the job was probably time management. Balancing school work, with college admissions, with other activities, and with a personal life was particularly hard, but nothing I couldn't handle. Indeed it is similar for all members of the school board, most of whom have full-time job as well as serving on the school board.

Was it hard interacting with the long-serving board members?

The student members in Montgomery County are welcomed with open arms by even the longest serving members, so luckily that was not a challenge. All the members listen to the student member's opinions and seriously take them into consideration even if they do not have a vote.

How did you try to communicate with the student body?

I created a SMOB 2.0 Initiative where I tried to connect students with their decision-making authorities. I used social media to rally students and inform of the issues. I created a committee to try and reach out to students around the county, etc. I used my blog and Facebook to solicit feedback on certain policy items and ask for input. I also used it to disseminate information about events and ways students could get involved in addition to updating the student body on anything that they were interested in. For example for the budget issues, I would write articles on the entire budget process and what was currently going on in a way that students could understand and told them about opportunities like the Youth Town Hall, where they could come out and voice their opinions. I also created Youtube videos to kind of demystify the job that I have as their representative.

What would you change about the entire SMOB process?

I would probably change the voting rights to allow the Student Member to have full voting rights on all matters. We were very close this year to getting it, but hopefully it'll be expanded very soon to allow the SMOB a full vote on all issues. I cannot vote on: boundary changes, capital and operating budgets, negative personnel matters (firing), and school closings (shutting down a school).

How did becoming the SMOB change the way you think about government processes and political participation?

I really learned that people have the ability to change their governments. It only takes one person to change your community. That one person can rally a crowd of people to

really make a statement to their elected officials and other politicians that their voice matters.

Do you think having a SMOB increases the political engagement of youth voters? Why or why not?

Yes, definitely. It empowers the youth and gives them a real stake in the school system. On an annual basis, students are part of the decision making process. They have the ability to elect a representative who most accurately reflects their wants and issues in the school. As a result, every April students actively voice their opinions and needs to both candidates. During the term, the student member makes an active attempt to continue to listen to the needs of the students and empower them to truly make their voices heard. In Montgomery County, the Student Member is something of a de facto student leader in the community. When it comes to even issues like transportation, healthcare, etc. the student member is able to rally students around issues that they care about.

Was it difficult getting the attention of young voters?

Initially, after the election, yes. But seeing one of their peers stand up for the issues that they care about truly makes a difference. It would be different if a random local official came in and spoke to them about the environment. But when one of their peers, the representative that they elected begins to rally people for an issue that they care about, it is a completely different story.

Would you recommend having a SMOB to other counties and students? Why?

Yes. There is nothing like having your own representative in the decision making process. It changes the way a community looks at youth and students and their impact on society.

There are student members in about half the counties in Maryland. Only about five of them have any voting rights at all. Anne Arundel County has full voting rights. I have had interaction with them. In the fall, I led a coalition of student members across the state in an attempt to create a long lasting organization of student members.