



Philadelphia Board of Education
Student Board Representatives Year in Review Report
June 2019

Alfredo Praticò, J.R. Masterman High School
Julia Frank, Northeast High School

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF
PHILADELPHIA

BOARD OF
EDUCATION

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Biographies:



Alfredo Praticò: Alfredo is a member of the Class of 2019 at Julia R. Masterman High School, where he is president of its Student Government. He is also Vice-Chair of the Youth Commission for the City of Philadelphia (appointed by Councilman Bill Greenlee) as well as founding member and former president of the School District's City-Wide Student Government. He is dedicated to representing all students, especially those who traditionally have no voice. He hopes to continue advocating for all issues and to truly improve the lives of his peers in the future. He will attend the University of Pennsylvania.

Julia Frank: Julia is a senior at Northeast High School where she participates in both the AP Capstone Program and IB Certificate Program. She is an active member of National Honor Society, serves as a mentor for incoming freshman, is the owner of City Slickers Lip Balm Co., and holds a part-time job at Ernie's Pizzeria. As a student at a neighborhood high school, Julia is dedicated to advocating for the interests of students across Philadelphia and encourages students to share their stories. She hopes to see students have a more active role in policy and decision making in the District. Julia will attend the University of Pittsburgh on a full-tuition scholarship in the fall.

Introductory Letter from Alfredo Praticò

Dear reader,

I am the son of a broken city. A city where one-third of its people live in poverty, are marginalized, and are far from the few schools equipped to help their children advance. Yet, it is a city I love.

When I was in sixth grade, budget cuts for public schools were so severe that my school needed donations of toilet paper, soap, and pencils to function. A leak in our roof flooded the stairs and we just walked around it.

That same year I won my first student government election because I wanted things to change. Working to raise money for recess supplies and representing my class soon grew to fighting for larger parts of my community.

In high school, my role as an advocate for city youth expanded with my appointment to the Philadelphia Youth Commission, a group of students who advise city government on youth-related legislation. As a commission, we meet monthly, write briefs, and present testimony to City Council. We fight to make sure all young people around Philadelphia are given opportunities and are treated fairly in all aspects of life.

This year as one of the first two student members on the Philadelphia Board of Education so many of my beliefs about how to represent have been upended, which have underscored the serious difficulty of gaining the confidence and trust of those who have learned not to trust.

Sadly, many of the youth of Philadelphia are ingrained with the belief that authority does not care. They come from communities where homelessness is ever-present, gangs offer hope, and incarceration is a natural and often expected outcome for many.

For the first time, I directly represent the students of Philadelphia on a governing body whose decisions will impact students in Philadelphia for generations to come. I am compelled to go out and gain the trust of my fellow students and meet them on their turf. Julia and I visit high schools across the city to see what they see, to expand our perspectives so we can thoughtfully contribute to comprehensive solutions. Walking the streets they walk shows us why they see a

dead end and why a new path must be laid. I am certain that progress and change demand a fierce coalition of both the afflicted and the privileged.

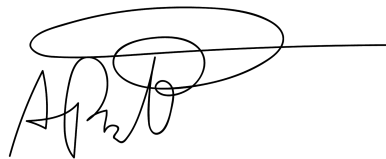
Meaningful, broad changes are tough to make because a behemoth as large as the School District of Philadelphia (which has 200,000+ students) requires a commitment to small steps. The fruits of our labor will take a long time to flourish, so we have learned to embrace the process and channel our passions toward making sure all students' voices are represented through incremental changes in policies. These may be small steps in progress, but progress nonetheless.

Long term progress in education requires thinking outside of the box rather than finding solutions that fit neatly into one. Progress in marginalized communities seeks an approach to education that addresses infrastructure and outreach programs not just adherence to a core curriculum.

My personal experience with a broken education system in Philadelphia repeats throughout the country. I hope to continue my activism in education and social reform as I continue in life, and I would like to help all students that come after me join in this fight and move it forward. The process may be slow, but I am confident that a solution will come, not in one revolution, but in many small battles.

I have been honored and humbled to serve as student member on the Philadelphia Board of Education, and I can not wait to see the progress to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alfredo Praticò', with a horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the signature.

Alfredo Praticò

2018-2019 Student Board Member

Our Objectives & Activities

Representing a student population of over 200,000 is not an easy task, not for an entire Board of Education, and especially not for its two student members. As the first student representatives in almost twenty years, one of the challenges we faced was defining our position. With no precedent, we sought to frame the role by creating three broad objectives. As student representatives, we committed ourselves to:

- 1) Hearing from students about the ways in which we could best serve them.
- 2) Bridging the gap between the Board of Education and students by both advocating for the interests of students and communicating Board decisions.
- 3) Promoting student voice and encouraging student engagement in policy and decision making in the District.

Since our work this year was centered around those three initiatives, we established that meeting with students across Philadelphia would be a critical part of our role as student representatives. We found that scheduling school visits was the best way to get in contact with diverse groups of students throughout the city. When selecting schools to visit, we found it imperative that the schools be reflective of all different school types and student experiences. After considering factors such as admission type, location, size, and student composition, we selected eleven schools. We met students from three charter schools, three neighborhood schools, three special admission schools, and two schools with Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. Collectively, the schools we visited enrolled nearly 16,000 students, which is slightly more than one quarter of the District's high school population.¹ These school visits became a foundational part of our job, as they accounted for all three of our initial objectives. In meeting with students through these school visits, we were able to hear their stories and share their concerns, discuss the importance of their voice and how they can get involved in student advocacy work, and inform students about the Board of Education and its function in the District.

In addition to school visits, we met with students involved in advocacy by attending various meetings hosted by groups such as the Philadelphia Youth Commission, the City-Wide Student Government, UrbEd Advocates, and the Superintendent's Advisory Council. We also made an effort to reach out to students through social media. We created Student Board Representative profiles on both

¹ According to the District's City-Wide Profile Page (dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/philadelphia/index.html#)

Instagram and Twitter², and held various conversations with students through those platforms.

Finally, we attended all of the monthly Student Achievement & Support Committee Meetings and all of the monthly Action Meetings. We did so to provide student perspective on policies being considered and to present our findings from our meetings with students. Our major findings from these visits are detailed in this report.

² [@PHLStudentReps](#) on both platforms.

School Visit Summaries

The goal of our school visits was to talk to students about their experiences, to gauge student opinion on certain issues, and to inform students about the role of the Board of Education. We hosted roundtable discussions where students often shared freely, but we also asked specific questions regarding opportunity, in-school support, and the importance of student voice. This section of our report documents the recurring ideas and opinions we heard across schools and from multiple students during our school visits. While these themes were not generated in a scientific matter, we believe they accurately reflect the larger issues that we heard raised repeatedly by students during our visits.

Opportunity: A large part of our discussions focused on opportunities and resources for students both in and out of school. For opportunities in school, we asked about the availability of challenging, engaging, and interesting courses. Responses were mixed. Students from magnet schools felt that they had access to challenging courses and course options that aligned with their interests. They also enjoyed having the freedom to select classes because they could focus on subjects that interested them. Students from other schools felt that there were some challenging classes available but it all was dependent on the teacher. Many students shared stories about classes where there were substitutes for most of the year or where the teacher was not invested in the class and so they learned very little. Students also expressed frustration about not having the freedom to select courses, and felt disengaged because they were placed in classes which did not interest them or align with their career goals.

For our discussion of opportunities and resources outside of school, we talked about the many programs reserved for Philadelphia public school students that provide mentoring, academic support, and connections to internships, externships, and research opportunities throughout the city. We wanted to know whether students were being informed of such opportunities and resources and, if they were, why or why not they took advantage of them. We found that students often expressed a general lack of knowledge about such programs. For students who did receive some information about resources, they believed that it was not well publicized or made easily accessible to them. Students also admitted to not knowing where to go for more information in order to take advantage of such opportunities, and some students expressed feeling reluctant to seek opportunities because they felt that they were not qualified to get them.

In-school support: Another topic of inquiry during our discussions was school climate. We wanted to learn more about the environment of each school and the support available to students in school. Responses were mixed. As far as social/emotional support, students from smaller schools felt that the counselors and staff were all invested in the well being of the student body. Students expressed that they could always communicate with a counselor, administrator, or staff member if there was an issue. As far as preparedness for college or a career, seniors at these schools felt they had personalized care in developing a plan for life after high school.

In schools with larger student bodies, responses were generally the opposite. Students in these schools felt that many of the counselors and staff were not invested in the students and they expressed feeling uncomfortable speaking to them about personal matters. They also felt that they did not receive personalized care because of the large student to counselor ratio. Students at these schools said much of the support they received came from teachers and fellow students. They all felt that there was at least one teacher they could go to if they had a problem. Seniors at larger schools also said they struggled with planning for college because they were not well informed on the immense college application process.

Student voice: Finally, we talked to students about the importance of their voice in school. For schools with student governments, students felt that they had an active role in decision making. They felt that their voice was heard and listened to. For schools without student governments, they felt that decisions involving students were made without ever consulting students. They felt that even when suggestions were brought to administrators they were not listened to.

State of the District According to the Students

Since our discussions focused primarily on shortcomings of the School District, our report highlights many areas of growth. We believe that it is equally important to mention, however, that students also spoke of phenomenal things they felt their school and district had to offer.

Across many schools, students talked about how district partnerships with nonprofits and other agencies increased the opportunities available to them both in and out of school. Parkway Center City students spent much time discussing how privileged they felt to have the opportunity to take classes at the Community College of Philadelphia while still having the student community unique to a high school. Students at The Workshop School felt that getting hands-on experience in a trade while completing their education would leave them well-prepared for college and a career after high school. Students at Mastery Gratz were grateful that interning and volunteer work was incorporated as a part of their curriculum.

Many of these opportunities were not limited to purely academic endeavors. The newly rebuilt PSTV studio and station at School District headquarters has given hundreds of students access to professional media equipment and trainings allowing them to pursue interests in journalism, cinematography, and music production. Ensuring arts programs in each school (both through district and outside support) has also opened new avenues for students to express themselves, both as members of vocal or instrumental ensembles, but also as band members, songwriters, and poets. It was not long ago that a choral or instrumental music teacher was an endangered species in Philadelphia public schools, but thankfully they have reemerged in full force and have helped guide some of the most talented young artists this city has to offer.

Finally, though our policy recommendations deal directly with teaching and class selection, it is important to recognize that these were written to address small minorities of school staff. The feedback we received of teachers not meeting their students' needs were outnumbered manyfold by the stories of teachers going far above and beyond their stated duties. Students shared so many stories of teachers who would stay after school to provide extra tutoring, teachers who helped students develop a plan for college or a career after high school, teachers who would write short-notice letters of recommendations, or just be a caring pair of ears to support a student in their second home.

Policy Recommendations:

The following is a list of policies we have drafted and propose to the Board based on the student feedback received this year. This list does not include broad initiatives which have been campaigned on for years, such as better school facilities and amenities, better lunches, and lower student-to-counselor ratios, though we received that feedback from students as well. We fully support efforts aimed at addressing those issues though do not believe a drafted policy from us is necessary because there are already many proposals.

A policy to address/start a system of teacher feedback — many students wished to give input to their teachers about their classes to ensure they received the support and instruction they needed, but feared retaliation from teachers or administrators. The policy would set up an anonymous system for students to give feedback to their teachers for use in improving student learning (similar to systems many colleges have in place.)

A policy to address class selection — students from some of the largest high schools in the city expressed dismay at the fact that they had no say in the classes they were taking. While some schools have a rigorous and highly competitive admission process to take Advanced Placement and other selective courses, other schools randomly assign classes based on rostering convenience. Students described receiving their schedules on the first day of school only to learn that they will take a particular A.P. class when they have neither the grades nor interest in the subject. Others described wanting badly to take an advanced class but not knowing how to be admitted to them. When resources and course offerings are so sparse in schools, we cannot afford to exclude a student when there is a course available to them.

A guideline on career preparedness for high school students— the most common issue we heard was that students did not feel prepared for college or career. Many students did not have a resume, did not know how to prepare for an interview, or even how to send a formal email. As a district, we have been working for years on increasing our graduation rate, but have few statistics for where students are one, five, or ten years down the line. We fear that many seniors are graduating in June and entering a world where they have no direction or game plan. A school's job does not end once grades are submitted or the bell rings. We have a responsibility to give students the ability to seize as many opportunities as possible, and it is apparent that we must do better.

Suggestions for Current and Future Student Advocates

As students, our most powerful tool is our voice. We are on the front lines and we are the ones best equipped to change the policies and mentalities which can hold us and our peers back.

As a student advocate, you hold a responsibility to represent what your peers experience on a daily basis, and to share those experiences with decision makers in schools, districts, cities, and states. A position as a student advocate requires a dedication to representing ideas superseding your own. It requires an acceptance that your view on a subject may not be the only one, and that if you find that your views diverge greatly from the mean, what you share may not be your own personal view.

As an advocate, you also have the ability to influence your peers and encourage them to be involved. The larger the number of proponents, the more powerful a position (and by extension, the students) becomes. Further, the measure of your success can not come solely from what you accomplish in your tenure, but how those actions are built upon by those who follow.

Through our term we heard from many different students, both individually via school visits and also through student speakers at Board of Education meetings. We found student speakers to be extremely influential, especially when speaking on issues at their school. We made a video with suggestions on tips to testify, which can be found on the District's YouTube Channel.

Conclusion Letter by Julia Frank

Dear Reader,

As I conclude my term as Student Board member on the Philadelphia Board of Education, I can look back and say this experience has been truly life-changing.

Serving as a student representative was the first advocacy position I *ever* held. The road forward seemed daunting and I felt ill-equipped. And yet, a few short months later, here I am: co-writing policy, holding meetings with students across the city, and using my voice to speak for over 200,000 students. I am grateful for the opportunity I had to participate in decisions about my education and influence educational policy. It has been an amazing year.

To future student representatives, I would like to share some of the lessons I've learned this past year:

1. **Speak up.** As student representative, you are in the unique position to see the direct impact of District policies in the classroom. A student representative has an on-the-ground view of the diverse needs and opportunities of the students in the District. It's important to share your experiences, share the stories of others, and not to be afraid to voice your concerns. I learned that there is so much power in what a student has to say.
2. **Ask questions.** Board meetings are very procedural. There will certainly be rules you've not heard of and acronyms that are not part of the common jargon of students. If you don't know what something means, don't be afraid to ask! Questions not only allow you to make valuable contributions to the discussions but they may also help illuminate information to other Board members or community members in the audience.
3. **Governing is hard work.** The student board representative position is demanding. On top of your school work, there will be long meetings, over-stuffed binders to review, and lots to read to stay informed. There will be divisive topics and challenging conflicts to navigate. But having the opportunity to make a lasting impact in the District is well worth the labor.

I applied for the Student Board Member position because I love my school district. Loving my school district did not mean I believed it was perfect. Rather, I was committed to making it better. And as we reported, we have made tremendous

progress. With dedicated administration, teachers, staff and phenomenal programs for students to get involved in, the Philadelphia School District is something to be proud of. Our schools are changing the lives of city kids and giving them the opportunity to leave school equipped for college, a career, and adulthood.

But, there is still work to be done. You must carry the mantle and work with the Board and District Administration to ensure all students have access to these incredible programs. You must continue to work to ensure that all students have access to challenging and engaging courses. You must continue to work to ensure that every student graduating has a plan for life after high school. You have the opportunity to bring real change and make life better for students around the District. If you work with others with purpose, mission, and humility you can create meaningful changes that better our school system for all students.

It has been an absolute honor and a pleasure to serve and I cannot wait to see the progress to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia Frank". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julia Frank

2018-2019 Student Board Member

As we complete this year, it is fitting to thank the many adults and students who have helped us along the way. There have been too many individuals to count but we want to give specific thanks to:

Team in the Office of the Board of Education

Ricardo Calderón
Barbara Dallao
Julia Danzy
Imahni Ellison
Leticia Egea-Hinton
Dr. William Hite
Mayor Jim Kenney
Mallory Fix Lopez
Lee Huang
Dr. Maria McColgan
Dr. Christopher McGinley
Dr. Angela McIver
Domenico Praticò
Wayne Walker
Joyce Wilkerson
Tyler Wims

To the many students which have shared their time with us, either in person or online. You have made our job possible and worthwhile. Thank you.

Appendix



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT
OF PHILADELPHIA

No. XXX

SECTION:

TITLE:

ADOPTED:

REVISED:

Number Title

Purpose:

The Board of Education is committed to ensuring all students receive an education which helps support and further their goals as students and as members of society. Also, the Board recognizes the importance of collaboration between the course instructor and students, and encourages dialogue between the two with the goal of cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship.

Definition

Execution - All students will have the opportunity to complete an anonymous feedback form for each course they are enrolled in. This form will be available for students twice per academic year, once at the end of the second marking period, and once at the end of the fourth marking period, and will be open for enough time that students may fill out the form for all courses enrolled.

Data Analysis - Once the form has been closed for submission, the District will aggregate the results and provide the teacher and school principal with the results in a timely manner.

Data Use - The teacher and principal may take appropriate steps to modify instruction as reflected by the results of the survey. The District may also keep a record of the results of the survey aggregated by school or teacher for internal use and in evaluating a school via the School Progress Report.

Authority

The Board of Education authorizes the Superintendent to engage the student population in a uniform, anonymous way of providing constructive feedback to teachers, school, and district staff.

Delegation of Responsibility

The Board of Education authorizes the Superintendent to delegate responsibility of the development of this form to a group of students representative of the District's student population. The Board of Education authorizes the Superintendent to delegate responsibility of the construction and execution of this form to the appropriate district employees or contractors.

Legal References

1. Philadelphia Board of Education Policy 906
2. Philadelphia Board of Education Policy 232

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

No. XXX

SECTION:

TITLE:

ADOPTED:

REVISED:

Number Title

Purpose

The Board of Education is committed to providing all students an education in which their academic needs and interests are met within the school environment. Further, the Board recognizes that enrollment in selective courses is a privilege for both the school and student and enables the student to pursue their interests in a more specialized and challenging manner than a normal course. The Board believes that students may not be forced to take a selective course which they would not like, and believes that the students have a right to apply for selective courses in a uniform manner across a school.

Definitions

Selective Course - Any course which is not open to the entire student population and has a requirement for admission. These may include, but are not limited to, courses with the designation of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, honors, advanced, and regular.

Guidelines

All high schools are required to publish guidelines for students on admissions criteria to selective courses held in the school. All high schools must have an open and transparent application process on admission to selective courses. All high schools must have an application process for selective courses, which must have, but is not limited to, a ranked list of course preference filled out by the student. No high school may place a student in a selective course which they have not applied for.

Delegation of Responsibility

The Board authorizes the Superintendent to create standardized procedures and guidelines for admission to selective courses. The Board authorizes the Superintendent to implement and monitor the effectiveness of this policy.

Legal References:

Related Information:

Guideline on Career Preparedness Expectations

Prepared by Julia Frank and Alfredo Praticò

Student Members,

Philadelphia Board of Education SY 18-19

Preface:

While we have written entire policies to address various issues within the high school experience, we feel one of the most important aspects would not be best addressed as a policy. By far the most common issue we heard was that students did not feel prepared for college or career.

As a district, we have been working for years on increasing our graduation rate, but have few statistics for where the students are one, five, or ten years down the line. We fear that many seniors are graduating or leaving school and entering a world where they have no direction nor game plan. Given Philadelphia's high youth incarceration rates, many are turning to violence and crime to support themselves and their families. A school's job does not end once grades are submitted or the bell rings. We have a responsibility to give students the ability to seize as many opportunities as possible, and it is apparent that we are failing.

Recommendations:

As such, we recommend the School District of Philadelphia implement a required class for all seniors on college and career readiness. This class should teach students:

- How to write a strong resume.
- How to act and write in a formal setting.
- How to research jobs and find interesting careers.
- How to find and apply for internships and scholarships.
- How to apply for college or post-high school programs.
- How to network and make connections outside of school.