

VOICE OF T

by Albert Corvah



Student Member Of the Board

WHEN I WAS IN SEVENTH GRADE,

my class watched a video about the Student Member of the Board of Education election. Howard County middle and high schools were required to show the video, which introduced the candidates, before distributing ballots. I watched with great interest. Who knew that students could participate in the board of education, influencing policies that affect them?

I've always been taught about the virtue of service—by my family, my religion, and my teachers. I've learned that giving of oneself is self-empowering and a means of inspiring others to improve their communities. I've also been praised for my speaking and communication skills. All this made the position of Student Member of the Board (SMOB) appealing, and I flirted with the idea of one day running for it.

A Renewed Interest

In high school, I became frustrated by the apathy of the Student Government Association. No effort was being made to raise funds for dances and other events, or to obtain students' feedback on decisions affecting them. This led to the Class of 2014 having only \$100, with prom expenses looming. It also led to a lack of school spirit, indicated by dwindling attendance at dances, athletic events, and musical recitals.

The spring of my sophomore year, I decided to address these problems. I campaigned for and was elected junior class president of Howard High's SGA. When school opened that fall, I spoke at the junior class assembly. I thanked my classmates for electing me and described the class's financial woes, including a threatened increase in the price of prom tickets from \$75 to \$90. In response, I proposed a Chick-Fil-A fundraiser and a lottery for a \$100 Target gift card in which students could buy tickets for \$1 apiece, with proceeds benefitting the junior class SGA. I told my classmates that our talents in academics, the arts, and athletics made us the most well-rounded class at school, and invited them to work with me to provide the junior and senior years we deserve. I received a standing ovation, and my love of student government was born.

THE STUDENTS

Over the next few months, I planned fundraisers and developed schedules and agendas for SGA meetings. After the administration approved the Chick-Fil-A fundraiser, I emailed the manager of the chain, who scheduled it for September. The event was well attended, raising \$153.

My idea for the gift card fundraiser conflicted with the school system's no-gambling policy, though. Instead, I proposed a joint junior/senior class fundraiser in which students would buy \$10 tickets—which included coupons—to watch a junior vs. senior burrito-eating contest at the nearby Qdoba. It was a huge success, raising over \$2,000. The junior class not only averted a prom ticket price hike, but saw a \$5 drop in ticket prices.

SMOB in the Making

My experience as class president helped me develop two skills needed to be Student Member of the Board: representing the student voice and communicating effectively with adults. As an SGA officer, athlete, and freshman mentor, I was familiar with the myriad of student perspectives and felt equipped to represent them on a larger stage. In January, I printed an application for SMOB of the Howard County Board of Education.

To become a SMOB, applicants in grade 10 or 11 must have forms signed by their parents, principal, and guidance counselor and obtain two letters of recommendation, including one from a teacher or other adult from school. Applicants are interviewed by a panel of students and adults from the Howard County Association of Student Councils (HCASC) and the local Board of Education, which then selects the two students who will face one another in a general election. Last year, nine students from county schools applied.

After winning the nomination in February, I created a Twitter account for my campaign, which quickly reached 200 followers. I talked to HCPSS students who attend my church, placed posters in schools, and spoke at a local youth summit and an HCASC General Assembly meeting. In April, I was elected SMOB, having received roughly 89 percent of votes cast. I was sworn in at my first meeting in July.

Advocate for Change

Throughout my campaign, I advocated for a policy change that would allow students to use cell phones between classes and during lunch. I believed this would decrease in-class use, which is distracting to both students and teachers. It would also allow students to use their phones in cases of emergency, important in this time of growing uncertainty over school violence.

Some traditionalists and cynics worry about the possibility of distracted students, but I see a student body responsible enough to use their phones not

only in times of emergency, but to enhance their education by using them to conduct research and study for tests.

Principals approved the policy revision, and this year, students in grades 9–12 can use their phones outside of class. At Board meetings, teachers, students, and parents alike thank me for the policy's success in limiting in-class use, which makes students more attentive and raises morale by allowing them to demonstrate responsibility in using their devices in school.

This year, I also asked to serve on the Board's Legislative Committee in order to overcome a burden inherent in the position of SMOB: The four-plus hours a week spent as SMOB could be spent filing college applications; participating in extracurricular clubs, sports, and activities; and working. The need to sacrifice these things could easily deter qualified students from applying for the position. I'm advocating for a \$5,000 college scholarship, which I believe will strengthen the position of the SMOB—and by extension, the student voice.

The Board approved the proposal, which we've presented to state senators and delegates who will consider educational policy in January. The reactions of the members of the General Assembly have been favorable, and I'm hopeful that a scholarship will be established beginning next year.

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The Value of the Student Voice

Having a student member on the local board of education is uncommon: In Maryland, only 6 out of 24 county boards have voting student members; 4 have SMOBs who are elected by students in their respective counties. A commonly held tenet of boards of education is that students must come first; therefore, it could be argued that students have a right to advocate for policy they believe will help meet this goal.

That is what the student voice means to me. It's about more than allowing students to use cell phones or giving them more choices in the cafeteria. It's about channeling students' viewpoints into one universal voice that represents their needs and views to those in a position to respond to them. **i**

Albert Corvah, a senior at Howard High School in Ellicott City, MD, is president of his school's National Honor Society chapter and a member of the varsity football and track teams. He is also a member of Howard's Leading Each Other (L.E.O.), an organization that seeks to improve school climate through community service and mentoring younger students.