

1720 Rose Street
Berkeley, CA 94703

September 17, 2016

Dear North East Berkeley Association Editor, President, Vice President and Board of Directors,

I was deeply disappointed to read your position on Measure Y-1 in your Fall 2016 newsletter. I encourage you to reverse this decision and correct the record.

Measure Y-1 would allow otherwise eligible 16 and 17 year olds to vote for BUSD directors if certain conditions are met. The Measure is supported by the BUSD directors and many local elected officials.

Your newsletter stated: *The NEBA board is opposed to this measure: our youth are already over politicized and have enough to handle with fundamental educational achievement, social stress and family life; this measure represents a slippery slope and is part of an undesirable movement to generally lower the voting age and empower yet more ignorance in the voting booth.*

Your position is out of touch with current data and democratic trends, and reeks of condescension and ill informed disdain towards our local youth. Civic engaged youth, especially those working to engage even more youth, deserve our respect and encouragement, not our obstruction.

It is astonishing that you would complain that “our youth are already over politicized.”

Voting rates in this country trail those in most industrialized countries. Youth voting rates are dismally low, even though youth will have to live with the results of the elections for decades to come. Less than 20% of youth 18- 29 voted in the 2014 mid-term elections – the lowest turnout ever recorded. And the proportion of young people who said that they were registered to vote (46.7%) was also the lowest over the past forty years. With pressing long term issues like climate change and increasing inequality that shape the future security of today’s youth. Our democracy needs more youth engagement, not less. That’s why organizations across the country, from [Common Cause](#) to [Rock the Vote](#) are engaging in research, advocating and on the ground projects to *increase* youth voter engagement.

Data from communities in the US and internationally which have allowed 16 and 17 year olds to vote in school board or other elections confirms that getting in the practice of voting early leads to greater voter participation for years to come. In fact, not only do voters who start early have higher lifelong participation, but there’s also evidence that increased youth voting “trickles up” and encourages higher voting rates among their parents. This is exactly the kind of initiative that those who believe in a healthy, thriving democracy should support.

You also condescendingly claim that Measure 1 would “empower yet more ignorance in the voting booth.” Seriously? You’re claiming our youth are ignorant? Research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds are developmentally ready and as informed and engaged in political issues as older voters. If you honestly believe that Berkeley youth are more ignorant than adults, I encourage you to explore the hundreds of student-led clubs at the high school, and I challenge you to take one of their exams from classes like *Power and Politics* or *Theory of Knowledge*. Further, if the education system were producing ignorant youth, the solution is greater engagement in the education system, not silencing the voice of youth in our democracy on issues that affect them directly – like school board elections.

We trust 16 and 17 year olds to drive cars. They pay taxes and are otherwise members of society; yet you oppose them having a say in electing the school board directors of their own school system?

I believe in greater youth political engagement both because I am deeply concerned about civic apathy and the erosion of our democracy -- and because I have seen the benefits first hand.

My 17 year old Berkeley High School senior is engaged in many civic and political activities – all aimed at creating a more sustainable, equitable and healthy future for her generation. Today she joined the local coastal clean up with a dozen friends. In recent years she has organized a coat collection for the homeless, marched in the streets for racial justice, collected signatures on a petition to prevent oil drilling in the Arctic which would have had catastrophic climate impacts, and authored bills in her Youth & Government program to promote healthy body images by ending photoshopping of models in advertisements and to combat rape culture by removing the statute of limitations for rape cases. She also supports Measure Y1. You claim that our Berkeley Youth are “over politicized.” So which of those activities – from caring for the homeless to combating climate change – do you recommend she stop?

Also, you claim that youth have enough to handle with fundamental educational achievement, social stress and family life, implying that civic engagement would be a detrimental distraction.

In spite of, *or perhaps because of*, her level of civic engagement, she is an eager learner and maintains a 4.0 grade point average. She trains and competes as an accomplished athlete. She is a school newspaper editor and holds an officer position in the Berkeley Youth & Government delegation. I am proud of her academic and athletic accomplishments, but the thing I am most proud of is her commitment to being engaged in our democracy and community to create a better world. Those are the characteristics we should be encouraging in our youth.

Please reconsider your position and be on the right side of history by joining the growing movement to revitalize our democracy and welcome increased youth civic engagement. I would like to hear back from you about your position on Y1 and I would also appreciate knowing who authored the language in the newsletter? Was this language approved by the staff and full board?

Sincerely, North Berkeley resident, Ann Leonard

