
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

2019 National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony

November 14, 2019

Student Speaker: Nate Tinbite, John F. Kennedy High School

Nate Tinbite: Thank you, Adam, for the introduction. Once again, my name is Nate Tinbite. I'm the 42nd student member of the Montgomery County Board of Education, representing 164,000 students in the nation's 14th largest school district. Over the past two years, I've seen students step up across the country, following in the footsteps of the courageous students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. For many years and for many of you, February 14th marked a turning point for youth activism in this country. But the truth is, we've been doing this work for many years. We've been organizing, rallying, and thousands of students from my home county, Montgomery County, have always been at the front steps, mobilizing to the issues that are closest to us.

I myself was in eighth grade when I first became engaged in public advocacy. I gave my first testimony fighting for kids like me. My father's gray tie felt tight around my neck, so long that it extended past my belt buckle as I stood before nine county council members. I was there to advocate for more resources to help my friends, whose challenges mirrored my own. They struggled to learn English in a complex school environment. I was invigorated to challenge the resource-based disparities that were alienating a large number of students in my county. After testifying, I immediately recognized that my voice can be used to help out students like me, and that there are more universal issues affecting minorities, from student discipline to the opportunity gap. I recognized as Montgomery County students, we have a student member on the board of education that represents us and our voices on these issues daily, who we all call the SMOB.

In our district, we value the student voice. The student board member isn't someone who only listens to the discussions at the board table, but one who has a full vote and fully participates on all matters. That means that I can vote on a budget that's larger than the GDP of Eritrea and Sierra Leone. That means that I can vote on bargaining in collective matters and boundaries. That means that I have a true voice to represent students, to make sure that no decisions are made about us, without us. The weight of this role may sound like a lot for a 16, 17, or 18-year-old, but the journey one takes to get here justifies their ability to successfully complete this work. To run for the student seat on the school board, a junior in high school or a senior in high school will partake in one of the largest elections in Maryland, where 86,000 students from 66 secondary schools vote.

This election is a crowning example of a large stock of students who've taken their election as the voting turnout is upwards of 90%. By no means is this a popularity contest, nor is it something that kids just do for college. The responsibility and importance of representation on our educational issues is understood, and the gravity of the process is reflected in the passion and drive that is easily viewed. Similar to a presidential election, candidates campaign to hundreds of voting delegates from January to the end of February, in hopes of being one of the final two finalists and proceed in the general election in April. In fact, they'll be looking for my predecessors sometime soon. Candidates have to fight tooth

and nail to garner support in this election, preparing campaign literature, posters, stickers, websites, and videos, most of which are better than material seen in other political elections.

I went through this process. I ran on the message that the zip code of your school should not determine the quality of your education. I sought to change the disconnect and hopelessness that I once felt in eighth grade for all students in my county. During the campaign, I rode hour-long buses to get to schools and visit students. I've lost my voice a lot from trying to talk to middle school students at a time in the cafeteria. By the way, teachers and admins, I do not know how you do that.

And in summary, I worked hard to champion equity across the district, especially as a child of immigrants, as an individual of color, and as a student in the most impoverished school in the district. Traditionally, the student school board member hasn't been a student of color or one who goes to a less affluent school. But in Montgomery County, we pushed boundaries of the norm. I'm proud to be the first African-American student board member in 14 years. Those 54,000 students who elected me did so with the expectation that I would uphold certain values and ideals as their full voting representative on the school board. Even now at the board table, it's easy to get lost in budget figures and policy points and data points. But every time that I meet with my constituents, I'm constantly reminded of the reason why I ran in the first place, to ensure that every student has access to a high-quality education.

I was elected to uphold the values of public education and fight for the full funding of our public school budget, not to privatize or profit off of it. I was elected to stand up for LGBTQ and trans students across the district, not to retract their protections or deny them from their basic rights. I was elected to strengthen protections against sexual harassment and assault, not to weaken them. I was elected to listen to our teachers and admin and staff, not to attempt to strip them of their collective bargaining. Through this one electoral process, I truly learned that our voices do matter, every student in every school. However, it's not just the process that highlights the importance of student voice. It's the work done at the table by the elected individuals that proves why every school board across this nation should have a full voting student member.

We're the closest to the decisions that are made to us and so we should potentially have our voices at the forefront of those decisions. But we could see the disparities in many of the policy points and issues that are affecting us. Because he could see the disparities in English learner students at his school, Matt Post, the student board member two years ago, passed the budget amendment, adding \$750,000 to English language learners programs funding. Because she went to a segregated school in her district, my predecessor, Ananya Tadikonda, passed a proposal unanimously that says that we are now conducting a district-wide boundary analysis, for all of our 206 schools.

While I've only been in my role for a few months, I've introduced a memorandum recently to expand availability and bring back driver's education programs to Montgomery County public schools, because I struggled to pay for the programs myself. My perspective on youth engagement doesn't start and end with education advocacy. As the generation of social media, more and more young people are staying informed about their nation's political decisions, and are growing to become more active on the issues that are affecting them. I witnessed this engagement firsthand on March 14, 2018. A group of my friends and I mobilized 5,000 students and founded Montgomery County Students for Change, to make sure that we get those kids to the Metro so that way, they can come down to DC and rally for gun violence prevention measures. We were joined by many congressional leaders, the speaker of the

house, and minority leader of the Senate. We proved that day that this generation is a new and unsettling force in American politics.

A week later, tens of thousands of students came down to Washington, D.C. to rally for the March For Our Lives. I had the opportunity to join Matt Post, Brenna Levitan, and Michael Solomon onstage as Post delivered the speech. To this day, I've never been so moved by young people's activism in D.C. and elsewhere. Those kids inspired a new generation of young people. They inspired kids like me too. Many students are now rallying for climate change, immigration rights, and racial equality, and so much more. I've seen firsthand the power of young people's voices, inside the table and out. Our voices have evolved over time and we have proven to become a powerful, necessary, and relentless voice in today's discussions.

While it may seem like everyone supports our voices today, a surprising number of people don't. Members of older generations often discredit our opinions and undermine our goals and passions. They've never made the youth a priority unless we make ourselves a nuisance. Funnily enough, my exposure to the pushback on youth engagement was really aware when I first posted a tweet calling to lower the voting age to 16 years old. In response to this tweet, I got called a petulant infant by a prominent right-wing political commentator. Conversely, however, there are some people that truly recognize the work and power of young people's voices to uplift their future endeavors. They understand that we are a generation of new, engaged leaders. They understand that we do foster a new era of inclusion, understanding, and respect. They understand that we usher in, peacefully, a culture where there is truly no child left behind, on the issues, on the vote, and on the ground.

While I do have homework that I do need to get to after this, I want to leave you all with some homework yourselves. For the youth in your life that are directly impacted by your words, engage them. Ask for their opinions on everything, not just the views that you think they should have opinions on. And when they talk, actively listen and ask questions. Be engaged in their process, because the minute that they feel their opinions don't matter is the minute that we've lost a future leader of change in this nation. Thank you very much.