

I live in Berkeley, one of the first cities nationwide to pass a measure to lower the voting age in school board elections to 16. This happened in 2016, and passed with over 70% support. But now, it is 2020. And 16 and 17 year olds in Berkeley are still not able to vote in school board elections. My work with Berkeley's Vote 16 program over the past two years has taught me so much about what it means to be a young person in democracy. It has taught me that even after a measure passes, the implementation process is a long battle, with obstacles that many adults will see as not worth it to overcome, and many setbacks that will make them lose trust in the youth's ability to lead the fight. However, throughout this process, what has grown exponentially is the passion among 16 and 17 year olds to vote and to continue the fight. Recently, I saw this fight to have the voices of young people represented in the decisions made by the school board grow at Berkeley High School.

In the first two weeks of February, practically every student at Berkeley High School (which has over 3,400 students) was talking openly and passionately about the frequent occurrences of sexual assault and harassment that happen to students at our school. This open dialogue was prompted by a list of "Boys to watch out 4" which appeared on a bathroom stall on campus, exposing a topic many were aware of, but was always too taboo to talk about. This action, along with the overwhelming feeling that this conversation has been put off for too long as countless students continue to be sexually harmed and struggle to report their incidents, led to multiple walkouts of thousands of students. The first action we took was to leave our second period classes and gather in our school's courtyard, where thousands of us sat together, listening to survivors of sexual assault tell their stories and demand that the school improve their system of reporting incidents, and change the way they respond. Along with tears and discomfort that arose while discussing these traumatic topics, came a sense of anger towards both the rape culture perpetuated by the student body and towards the administration's failure to handle these cases, heal victims, and punish perpetrators. The next day, we left school and walked to the superintendent's offices, about half a mile away. We marched through the streets, wearing red, accompanied by the songs of our school's jazz band, and by honks of support. We stormed into the office building and piled in, climbing the stairs and eventually filling all three stories, wall to wall. After a long period of chanting "Yes means yes, no means no, rape culture has got to go," we were allowed into the room where Berkeley Unified School District's school board meetings are held. We piled in, occupying every single chair and every square inch on the floor. So many students had come to show support that we couldn't even all fit inside, so some students climbed up to the windows to peer in. Sitting there in the most highly attended school board meeting in BUSD history, we began to list off our demands to our superintendent. Student leaders, ages 14 to 18, took turns in front of the microphone, confidently and passionately sharing their stories and feelings in front of multiple adult administrators. Our demands included hiring two permanent Title IX coordinators for our district, improving the staff training on consent and reporting, implementing education on consent for grades K-12, starting a Coaching Boys into Men training for all Berkeley High School male sports teams, and continuing an open dialogue between administrators and students as part of a commitment to creating a school that is no longer plagued by a toxic rape culture.

The next struggle came with holding our administrators accountable to making these changes. It was hard to see that even though the school board seemed accepting and responsive to our complaints, we had no power to influence their decision-making, and no way to ensure the movement and demands we created wouldn't be swept aside. We need Vote 16 to be implemented not only in Berkeley, but nationwide, to give students the power to not only make noise about their complaints, but make change. Especially around this issue of sexual assault, students are the ONLY ones who know and who witness what goes on at school. For this reason, we the students must be the ones voting to make those changes and electing representatives who will advocate for our needs. At the end of that inspiring week of student activism, I wish I could've looked each school board member in the eyes and said, "If you don't meet our demands, you will lose the votes of all of these students."

While many opponents to Vote16 argue that students wouldn't be informed voters, we are truly the *most* informed about what goes on at our school and about what changes need to be made — which is what we will be voting on. The movement at Berkeley High School to stop sexual assault is just one of many that show that students know best what we need from our schools, and that we are exploding with passion to make change. If we are given the power to vote, I know we will.

