

THE VOTE16 NEW JERSEY PLAYBOOK:

How to Lower the Voting Age
in Your Community



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Introduction – Getting Started

Welcome to the Vote16 New Jersey Playbook. This hands-on guide supports the growing effort to expand local voting rights for 16- and 17-year-olds and gives you the tools needed to help you be part of it!

Vote16 is more than a policy idea. It's a historic, once-in-a-generation movement driven by students, families and local leaders who believe young people deserve a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

One day, 16- and 17-year-olds will be able to vote statewide in New Jersey, most likely through pending legislation (A4369/S3240). If history has taught us anything, it's that expanding voting rights takes time and persistence. But we don't have to wait for the state to act! In New Jersey, advocates fighting for a higher minimum wage built momentum by organizing at the local level – passing local laws, raising public awareness and pushing local leaders to take a stand.¹ The success of the local momentum eventually made the state pass a law to raise the minimum wage for workers statewide.² In the same way, we can build power and drive change by lowering the voting age town by town, creating the pressure and proof needed to win statewide.

That's where this Playbook comes in – to help you take action locally and build momentum for the Vote16 movement. Inside, you'll find lessons from the Newark campaign – what worked and what didn't; tips, strategies and reflections written by and for students; practical templates for organizing, legislation and outreach; and legal basics explained clearly and simply.

Each section stands on its own, so you can jump to whatever part you need – whether you're starting a local campaign, drafting an ordinance or getting out the vote.

Why Vote16 Matters

Before diving in, it's worth grounding yourself in why this work matters. As detailed in our *Let Us Vote* policy brief,³ voter turnout in New Jersey local elections is alarmingly low. In some school board races, participation hovers around just 3 percent and in certain municipal elections it barely reaches 4 percent. Both types of elections carry an enormous impact on young people.

¹ See Eric Strauss, *Bergen County announces \$15 minimum wage for its workers*, ROI-NJ.COM, Nov. 21, 2017, <https://www.roy-nj.com/2017/11/21/politics/bergen-county-announces-15-minimum-wage-for-its-workers/>; *Jersey City Mayor Signs Executive Order for \$15 Minimum Wage*, NJTV NEWS, [pbs.org/video/njtvnews-jersey-city-mayor-signs-executive-order-15-minimum-wage](https://www.njtvnews.com/video/njtvnews-jersey-city-mayor-signs-executive-order-15-minimum-wage) (last visited Aug. 5, 2025).

² Press Release, N.J. Dep't of Labor & Workforce Dev., *New Jersey's Minimum Wage to Increase to \$15.49/Hour for Most Employees on Jan. 1* (Oct. 8, 2024), [nj.gov/labor/lwdhome/press/2024/20241008_minwage.shtml](https://www.nj.gov/labor/lwdhome/press/2024/20241008_minwage.shtml).

³ MICAURI VARGAS ET AL., *LET US VOTE: WHY 16- AND 17- YEAR OLDS SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO VOTE IN LOCAL ELECTIONS AND BEYOND*, NJ INST. FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE (Aug. 2023), [njsi.org/reports/letusvote/](https://www.njsi.org/reports/letusvote/).

School board elections determine who governs schools at the most immediate level, how public dollars are spent and how schools are run – from school lunches and safety policies to curriculum decisions and extracurricular opportunities.

Municipal elections shape the communities students grow up in, influencing everything from parks and recreation to libraries and even housing and neighborhood safety.

Yet, against the backdrop of the dismal turnout in these elections among adults, the people most impacted by these decisions – young people – have no voice in the process.

At 16, young people are already active members of their communities. They drive, work jobs, pay taxes, care for family members and speak out at public meetings. They can even serve as poll workers. They are leading movements on climate change, racial justice, LGBTQ+ rights and education policy.

Young people are not just ready to vote – they should have the right to.

Lowering the voting age will not only increase civic engagement and boost turnout in overlooked elections, but it will also build civic responsibility earlier and form good voting habits. Plus, it will make our democracy stronger, more inclusive and more representative of those it serves.

Key Documents:

- [Policy Brief](#)
- [Flyers and Fact Sheets](#)

The Roadmap to Success

To get started, review the six core steps outlined below – they will walk you through a Vote16 campaign, from building support to passing an ordinance to turning out voters. You can read this Playbook from start to finish or jump straight to the step that will move your work forward.

Part I: Building the Movement: Organizing for Change –

Start your campaign, bring others in and build local momentum that lasts.

- **Step 1: Build Your Team and Secure Key Support**
- **Step 2: Spread the Word and Mobilize Support**

Part II: Passing and Implementing a Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town –

Learn how to draft and pass a local ordinance – and what to expect after it's adopted.

- **Step 3: Drafting and Passing the Ordinance**
- **Step 4: Implementing the Ordinance**

Part III: Winning at the Ballot Box: Voter Engagement and Getting out the Vote (GOTV) -

Get tools to register voters, educate your peers and turn out the vote.

- **Step 5: Turning New Voters into Active Voters**
- **Step 6: Sustaining the Momentum**

Part IV: Your Vote16 Toolkit -

Access templates, contact lists and sample language to help you organize and advocate more effectively.

You can use this Playbook to take action on your own timeline. If you want to connect or have questions, you can reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njisj.org.

PART I.

Building the Movement:
Organizing for Change



Lowering the voting age is about more than passing a law – it’s about building youth power. Real change starts with organizing, and that is where the movement to lower the voting age starts, too.

This section will walk you through how to launch a grassroots campaign rooted in youth leadership, coalition building and community engagement.

STEP 1 – Build Your Team and Secure Key Support

Forming a Core Organizing Team

Nobody can change the world or their community alone – you will need a team to get the job done! To anchor your campaign, bring together a team of passionate young people and adult allies committed to youth justice and democracy.

A strong core team can:

- Create a campaign plan, with goals and timelines
- Divide roles and responsibilities
- Build trust and support in the community
- Keep the energy going through challenges or setbacks

Potential roles for your organizing team include:

- Convener or team leader
- Advocacy coordinator
- Outreach and mobilization coordinator
- Communications coordinator
- Events coordinator
- Voter registration and GOTV coordinator

As you build your team, think broadly about whom to involve. Key stakeholders might include:

- Local elected officials (especially your mayor and city council members)
- School district leadership

- Student clubs
- Youth-serving organizations
- Parent-teacher associations
- Local voting rights or civil rights organizations (like Vote16NJ and the NAACP NJ State Conference Youth and College)
- Community activists and other trusted voices

Remember: Be intentional about making space for young people to lead. This campaign should be powered by the youngest people – 16 and 17-year-olds – who will benefit most from it.

Creating a Campaign Plan

Every successful campaign needs a strong plan to guide the work and keep your team on track. Your campaign plan doesn't have to be complicated, but it does have to be clear, realistic and rooted in your community's local context.

While your campaign plan is a roadmap, remember to build in flexibility. Campaigns often face unexpected challenges or opportunities – a vote might get delayed, a new supporter might step up or a public crisis could shift the landscape.

Your campaign plan should include at least the following elements:

Goals

Start your campaign plan by identifying the issue you are focused on and setting clear goals. In this case, that goal is to lower the voting age to 16 for local elections in your municipality. A clear, shared goal keeps your team aligned and focused.

Guiding Questions:

- What changes do you want to see and why?
- Do you want to see a new ordinance, ballot initiative or resolution?
- Will the ordinance allow 16-year-olds to vote in school board elections, municipal elections – or both?
- What does success look like in the next six to 12 months?

Impacted Communities

The Vote16 movement is about expanding democracy and centering the voices of young people – especially in decisions that affect their education and future. To build a campaign that's powerful, authentic and rooted in justice, start by identifying the communities directly impacted by the issue.

Think about who is excluded from the democratic process by the current voting age, and how their lives are shaped by policies they have no say in. These are the people your campaign should be built with, not just for.

Go beyond just identifying impacted young people; build meaningful relationships with them. Make space to deeply listen to their stories, experiences and visions for change. Create opportunities for ongoing dialogue and feedback so your campaign stays accountable to the people most impacted.

You'll come back to these communities throughout every phase of your campaign: when honing your goals, recruiting leaders, choosing tactics, monitoring the campaign's impact and celebrating victory. They shouldn't just be participants or token spokespeople – they should be co-creators and your strongest partners in the work.

Guiding Questions:

- Who is most affected by the current voting age?
- Who is most impacted by school board or municipal government decisions?
- What are their ages and what schools do they attend?
- How does being excluded from voting harm them or shape their day-to-day lives?
- What would it mean for them to be able to vote at 16? What would the benefits be?
- Who would be involved in implementing a Vote16 law or supporting young voters?
- How can you create a feedback loop with these community members?
- What platforms can you use to help them share their stories and shape the campaign?

Targets

Identify both your primary and secondary targets for your advocacy. This will shape your strategies and tactics.

Primary targets are decision-makers. This includes city council members, the mayor and school board members. Secondary targets are those who may be able to influence your primary targets. This might include influential community leaders, organizations or voters who can sway decision-makers.

Guiding Questions:

- Who can introduce or vote on a Vote16 ordinance?
- How do they get the role – are they elected or appointed?
- Who are their constituents and allies?
- What are their interests? What issues do they care about?

Allies and Opponents

Identify allies who share your values or might benefit from your goal – like organizations for young people, educators, community leaders and civil rights organizations. Invite them into your coalition and create real opportunities to collaborate. Strong campaigns are built on strong relationships.

Also consider your opponents – those who may stand against lowering the voting age because of misinformation, political motivations or doubts about young people’s readiness to participate. Understand their arguments so you can respond clearly and powerfully.

Some people or organizations may not be allies or opponents yet. With the right outreach and message, you may be able to bring them in.

Guiding Questions:

- Who are one to three groups or individuals who could support your campaign?
- What strengths or resources do they bring?
- Who might try to oppose the campaign and why?
- Who is undecided and how can you reach them?

Tactics

Once you’ve set goals, it’s time to decide how you’ll get there. Tactics are specific actions you’ll take to carry out that strategy.

No campaign can use every tactic at the same time. Choose a mix of tactics that will be most impactful in your community, align with your team’s strengths and capacity and demonstrate youth leadership.

You may need to escalate your tactics over time if you’re not seeing results. For example, at some point you may need to shift from building awareness to applying direct pressure.

Every tactic should serve a purpose: either building relationships, growing your base, shifting narratives or influencing decision-makers.

Common tactics include:

- *Community Outreach and Education:* Tabling, flyering and door knocking
- *Relational Organizing:* One-on-one conversations with your network and peer-to-peer outreach
- *Media and Digital:* Social media campaigns and press outreach
- *Lobbying:* Meeting with elected officials, giving public testimony and delivering letters demanding action

Guiding Questions:

- What's your strategy to win?
- How will you raise awareness, build support and move decision-makers?
- How will you adapt or escalate your tactics if needed?

Resources

All campaigns need resources – but that doesn't only mean money. Think about the skills, tools, spaces and relationships you already have access to, and where you'll need to find support.

People are often your most valuable resource. Friends, teachers, mentors and community leaders can offer skills, time and connections. Don't overlook things like access to meeting spaces, art supplies or club social media accounts. These can all be powerful resources.

Guiding Questions:

- What spaces can you use for meetings or events? (school, library, community centers, local businesses)
- What materials or technology do you have access to? (computers, printers, microphones, tablets, Canva)
- What skills does your team bring? (public speaking, graphic design, video editing, event planning)
- Who do you know who could support you? (teachers, local organizations, family, mentors)
- What training or tools do you need to build your campaign?

Timeline

A timeline can help your team work toward long-term goals while hitting important short-term goals. Create a simple calendar that tracks key dates, campaign milestones, deadlines and action steps.

Keep your plan realistic and leave room for flexibility. A good timeline builds in time for outreach, education, team-building and rest.

Key dates can include:

- City council or school board meetings
- Election Day or voter registration deadlines
- Back-to-school nights and school events
- National civic holidays (National Voter Registration Day, National Voter Education Week, Constitution Day, High School Voter Registration Week)
- Team meetings
- Planned campaign tactics and actions

Guiding Questions:

- When will you take action and carry out your planned tactics?
- Are there key events coming up in your school or city that you can plan around?
- What deadlines do you need to meet?
- Are there any civic engagement holidays that can create opportunities for your campaign?

Metrics for Success and Evaluation

Establishing clear campaign benchmarks can help your team evaluate whether your strategy is effective.

Knowing that you're making progress helps your team celebrate wins and stay motivated! Even if your Vote16 ordinance takes time to pass, smaller wins along the way are still powerful.

If you aren't making progress towards reaching your goals, it may be time to reconsider the campaign targets or tactics you're using. Build in regular reflection points to assess how things are going and adapt your plan as needed.

Benchmarks can include:

- Securing a meeting with a city council member
- Collecting 1,000 petition signatures from residents
- Recruiting a base of 50 youth leaders and volunteers
- Passing a Vote16 ordinance

Guiding Questions:

- How will you measure progress?
- What benchmarks can you set that are both significant and realistic?
- What does winning look like, including short-term and long-term wins – for your campaign and the impacted community?

Key Documents:

- [Campaign Plan Template](#)

Finding a Champion in Office

To lower the voting age in your town, a member of the city council will have to sponsor and introduce an ordinance. But to have a successful movement, you want more than just an ordinance sponsor – you want a champion.

Having an elected official who is in your corner and ready to do everything possible to get a Vote16 local ordinance over the finish line can make a huge difference.

While the city council may take the lead, don't overlook the role a mayor can play. If you live in a town that has a mayor and who is supportive of lowering the voting age, they can be a vocal advocate, rally public support or even push the municipal council to act.

Look for someone who:

- Believes in the voice of young people and empowerment
- Has a track record of standing with young people and marginalized communities
- Has been outspoken in support of voting rights and democracy
- Holds a leadership position on the city council

To recruit your champion:

- Request a meeting so that you can share your vision
- Come prepared with testimonies from young people, data and examples from other cities
- Outline the actions and activities you want them to take (e.g., introduce an ordinance, ask their colleagues for support, speak at a press conference, etc.)

You can find more on this in **Part 2: Passing and Implementing a Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town**, under **Step 3: Drafting and Passing the Ordinance**.

Get Schools Involved

The vast majority of 16- and 17-year-olds spend most of their day at school. Your campaign will be stronger if you get high school groups and officials involved and form strong partnerships with them.

Connect with:

- Social studies and civics teachers
- Student government advisors
- Student clubs and afterschool programs
- School board members
- Administrators who care about civics learning

Ways to collaborate:

- Look for opportunities to present in classes
- Host voter education pop-ups during school events, like assemblies and fairs
- Partner with teachers to include Vote16 in lessons and student programming

The sooner you can form partnerships with your school, the better! You can even begin having these conversations before you've found a local champion.



Bringing the movement to the classroom: Vote16 organizers visited Great Oaks Legacy Charter High School in Newark to connect with students, share voter information and help them register to vote.

Photo Credit: Great Oaks Legacy Charter High School

STEP 2 – Spread the Word and Mobilize Support

Host Community Events

Once you have your core team assembled and you've co-created a campaign plan, it's time to find supporters and grow your movement. Community events – from rallies to teach-ins to candidate forums – can help build momentum and visibility for your campaign.

Potential events include:

- A town hall for young people with elected officials
- A back-to-school voter block party
- A candidate forum focused on youth issues
- A screening and discussion of a civic-themed documentary
- Art-based events like poster-making or zine workshops



Young people from Newark at the Vote16 Town Hall learn about their newly won right to vote in school board elections, ask questions directly to election and school officials, and register to vote on the spot.

Use Outreach and Social Media

Community Outreach

While hosting community events is an essential part of community organizing, you'll be most successful at increasing awareness if you use multiple methods to connect with the community.

For example, you can also do in-person community outreach by:

- Attending meetings and events hosted by community organizations and sharing information about Vote16 with other attendees
- Tabling at fairs and festivals to share Vote16 resources and recruit supporters
- Putting up flyers and posters on community bulletin boards or areas with high foot traffic

See more on this under **Step 4 – Implementing the Ordinance**, a subsection of **Part 2 – Passing and Implementing a Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town**.

Social Media

To effectively reach young voters, you have to meet them where they are – and that means online. Digital outreach is one of the most effective ways to mobilize young people who spend a significant portion of their time on social media, messaging apps and digital platforms.

But not all online engagement is created equal. Authenticity, creativity and peer-to-peer connection are key. Make sure young people take the lead in creating social media posts and videos. Social media should feel personal and peer-led, not corporate or scripted.

You can make your Vote16 campaign visible through:

- Instagram takeovers
- TikTok challenges
- Group chats
- Hashtags that are catchy and consistent
- Graphics that are bright, succinct and easy to share across platforms

Train Student Leaders

Leadership development is essential to the success and sustainability of any social movement. Don't just ask young people to show up – invest in helping them lead!

Train young leaders in skills like:

- *Facilitation and meeting planning*: Teach young people how to plan and run meetings and calls, set agendas and keep peers engaged.

- *Relational organizing and canvassing:* Equip young people with tools to have one-on-one conversations that move others to act. Practice real scripts and role plays.
- *Public speaking and public testimony before elected bodies:* Practice writing and delivering short, compelling speeches. Use real council or school board meetings as mock scenarios.
- *Message strategy and storytelling:* Guide young people in crafting personal narratives that connect with different audiences, from peers to policymakers.

Make your trainings interactive and fun! Include icebreakers, games, breakout sessions and reflection. Always affirm young people’s lived experiences and the strengths they bring and build on their existing skills as leaders.



Leveling up our leadership! Organized by the Gem Project, this youth-led training brought together over 65 young leaders to build their skills in organizing and advocacy – then take action. After the training, participants conducted peer-to-peer outreach to over 100 additional young people, encouraging them to register to vote and get involved.

Photo Credits: Photography by Fresco

Engage the Media

Engaging with the press and media organizations can help broaden awareness, shape public perception and elevate the voices of young people.

A strong media strategy should include:

- *Relationship-building:* Reach out to local reporters, bloggers, local influencers and community newsletters. Share your story and invite them to events.

- *Student-led content*: Encourage young people to write op-eds or letters to the editor, especially around key milestones like ordinance votes or the first Vote16 election.
- *Media moments*: Plan media-worthy moments like rallies, press conferences or art installations that visually show the power of young people.
- *Message discipline*: Train young spokespeople to stay on message, answer questions confidently and redirect tough questions toward core values and solutions.
- *Storytelling*: For maximum impact, use messaging that features relatable and personal stories.

Tip: Create a media toolkit with talking points, sample press releases and quotes from young leaders that can be shared widely. You can even add graphics for social media.

Key Documents:

- [Talking Points](#)
- [Social Media and Event Toolkit](#)

You can use this section to get started at your own pace, and if you have questions or want support along the way, you can always reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njisj.org.

PART II.

Passing and Implementing a
Vote16 Ordinance in Your Town



Now that the organizing groundwork is in motion, it's time to turn that momentum into a local ordinance. This section outlines how to pass a Vote16 ordinance and make sure it is implemented effectively, so that 16- and 17-year-olds can fully participate in your municipality's local elections and decision-making.

STEP 3 – Drafting and Passing the Ordinance

Every ordinance effort starts in the same place: knowing what current law allows us to do. And when it comes to moving a Vote16 ordinance forward, one question always comes up first:

Is lowering the voting age legal in New Jersey?

Yes. New Jersey law allows municipalities to take local action to expand voting rights in non-partisan municipal and school board elections, *unless* specifically prohibited by state statute. Current law does not bar this. In 2024, Newark passed a Vote16 ordinance after extensive legal review, and other municipalities are following in its footsteps.

While the New Jersey Constitution⁴ guarantees the right to vote beginning at age 18, it does not prohibit local governments from allowing younger residents to vote in local elections. It sets the floor – not the ceiling. The state constitution outlines only who *must* be allowed to vote, while other state law defines who is excluded from the right to vote – for example, people who are currently incarcerated or whom a court has found mentally incapable of understanding the act of voting. That distinction leaves space for local governments to pass their own local voting laws – so long as those ordinances do not violate the state constitution and state laws – especially in municipalities with broad powers under home rule frameworks.⁵

The next key question is: *given that it's legal, how does my municipality's government structure shape the process for passing a Vote16 ordinance?*

Key Document:

- [Legal Overview: Authority and Process](#)

⁴ N.J. CONST. art. 2, § 1.

⁵ N.J.S.A. 40:48-2.

Understanding Your Municipality's Legal Landscape

Each municipality in New Jersey has its own structure, and that structure determines who introduces ordinances, who votes on them and what the path to passage looks like. Every municipality falls into one of five types – borough, township, city, town or village – and operates under one of 12 forms of government, including traditional forms like Commission and Council-Manager and several options under the *Faulkner Act*, such as Mayor-Council and Manager-Council. Each form of government defines who holds legislative authority in that municipality, how laws are introduced there and what the path to passing a law looks like.

For example, Newark is a city that operates under the *Faulkner Act*, using what is called a Mayor-Council form of government. This means the mayor and city council are elected separately, and each has distinct powers. The mayor oversees city departments and day-to-day operations, while the city council is responsible for passing local laws. Ordinances can be introduced by either the mayor or a councilmember, although it is more common for councilmembers to introduce them.

In Newark, the Vote16 ordinance to lower the voting age to 16 for school board elections was introduced by a city councilmember and then voted on and passed by the full Newark City Council. You can learn more at the [New Jersey League of Municipalities](#) about the different types of municipalities in New Jersey.

Once you've identified your municipality type, you'll want to answer a few key questions before reaching out to local leadership:

- Who has legislative authority in your municipality – councilmembers, commissioners or another body?
- When are your non-partisan municipal elections held – May or November (general election)?
- If you're targeting school board elections, are they held in April or November?

In New Jersey, if your municipality holds school board elections in April, the school district covers the full cost of the election. These costs are categorized as "special" and don't count against standard budget limits. When elections are moved to November, on the other hand, the county runs and funds them and is later reimbursed by the state. In this case, school districts may still be on the hook for added expenses through a formal agreement. The financial responsibilities for local elections are set by law – this wouldn't change under the Vote16 initiative, but local leaders may not be aware of them, so it's important they understand the cost implications before moving forward.

Beyond election timing and costs, the legal pathway your municipality can use to lower the voting age is also important. Some municipalities may choose to pass an ordinance, while others may explore a charter amendment to make the policy more permanent. Either way, successful efforts have paired strong organizing with clear legal strategy and early coordination with municipal attorneys.

Finally, things can get even more complicated when a school board is part of a [regional district](#). These school boards cover multiple municipalities and assign board members based on population, which can affect how receptive they are to the Vote16 idea. While school boards can't pass ordinances themselves, they can voice support publicly or recommend that municipal councils take action. In regional districts, it's best for each municipality to pass its own ordinance to make sure all students residing in the school district are treated equitably.

While New Jersey's system is complex, it is possible to work within it simply by being prepared. When in doubt, speak with your municipal clerk or connect with organizations that support voting rights for young people, like the Institute, to map out your next steps.

Building Legislative Support

Once you understand the legal landscape in your municipality, you can finally begin your advocacy. The first step is to do outreach to identify a champion on the municipal council – ideally, this is someone who believes young people should have a say in democracy and is willing to introduce the ordinance (see **Step 1: Build Your Team and Secure Key Support in Part I: Building the Movement: Organizing for Change**). If your mayor is also supportive of the initiative, even better. A committed council sponsor can make all the difference in building momentum and guiding the Vote16 ordinance through the process.

Once you've found your council champion, it's time to build broader support by:

- Scheduling one-on-one meetings with other decision-makers, particularly other councilmembers and even the mayor, to explain the campaign and answer questions
- Bringing strong materials to those meetings, including a sample ordinance, the Institute's *Legal Overview* and a one-pager with quotes and stories from students about why the right to vote matters to them and how voting would impact their lives
- Encouraging students, teachers and community members to attend council or board meetings, especially those meetings that allow public comment or voting on the ordinance

Most municipal councils require a simple majority – meaning more than half of the members must vote yes during their formal voting process – for an ordinance to pass. This is why building relationships and securing enough votes early on is key. Even skeptical officials can change their minds when they see well-prepared young people showing up and speaking out!

Key Documents:

- [Legal Overview: Authority and Process](#)
- [Talking Points](#)
- [Email Templates for Outreach](#)
- [Outreach Scripts and Peer Engagement Guide](#)
- [One-on-One Meetings Prep and Guide](#)
- [Council Presentation Template](#)

You'll find these resources and more in **Part IV: Your Vote16 Toolkit**. Use what's most helpful and make it your own!

Responding to Common Concerns

As you build support, you'll likely hear questions like:

- "Is this legal?"
- "Are 16- and 17-year-olds really ready to vote?"
- "Won't this make elections more complicated?"

These concerns often come up at council meetings, one-on-one conversations with officials and during public comment. Be ready with clear, confident answers and whenever possible, let students take the lead. Their voices are often the most compelling.

Here are examples of how to respond:

- Yes, it's legal. Newark passed a Vote16 ordinance in 2024 following legal review by their municipal attorneys, the New Jersey Attorney General's Office and the Governor's counsel. Under New Jersey state law, municipalities have *home rule* authority and broad discretion to legislate their own nonpartisan elections. This includes the ability to expand the local electorate, such as allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, so long as the local law doesn't conflict with state statutes or the state constitution – which this does not. The New Jersey Constitution provides an affirmative right to those 18 years older to vote, but it does *not prohibit* those younger from voting in local and state elections.
- Young people are ready. From organizing around education and climate change to speaking out on racial justice issues, students already show up for important issues in their communities. Lowering the voting age gives them the power to turn that civic engagement into real influence. At 16, many young people are already working, paying taxes, driving and taking on adult responsibilities without having a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Some are caretakers in their own families and even financially contribute to the household. If they contribute to the system the way adults do, they should have a voice in shaping it.
- Election offices can handle this. Municipal and school board elections often happen off-cycle, making them easier to manage. Once a Vote16 ordinance passes, the New Jersey Division of Elections begins updating the voter registration and ballot systems as part of their regular duties to facilitate elections statewide. With advance planning, clear procedures and good communication, implementation of this policy is straightforward.

Key Documents:

- [Talking Points](#)
- [Flyers and Fact Sheets](#)
- [Op-Ed and Letter Templates](#)

If you need help creating talking points, preparing for a meeting or coordinating with the Division of Elections, reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njsj.org. We're here to support you.

Drafting the Ordinance

Once you have a council legislative sponsor and initial support, it's time to put your proposal into writing. A clear, well-crafted ordinance sets the foundation for everything that follows.

Start with the templates below, which reflect best practices and legal guidance from other successful local efforts.

Your ordinance draft should clearly state that 16- and 17-year-olds are eligible to vote in local or school board elections and reference relevant New Jersey legal authority.

Please also remember to check in early with your municipal clerk to confirm formatting requirements, legal review steps and how to officially introduce the ordinance. A supportive council sponsor should submit the draft for review before it's placed on the agenda. The cleaner and more complete your draft, the smoother the process will be.

Key Documents:

- [Sample Municipal Ordinance Template](#)
- [Sample School Board Ordinance Template](#)
- [Sample Joint Ordinance Template](#)

The Path to Passage

In most municipalities, passing a Vote16 ordinance will follow a clear, step-by-step process:

- *Introduction* – A supportive councilmember introduces the ordinance to the governing body.
- *Public Hearing(s)* – Community members, especially students, show up and speak out in support of the ordinance.
- *Final Vote* – The council votes on the ordinance, usually at a later meeting.

Some municipalities may require two hearings, public notice or legal review before a vote. The process may vary, but the strategy stays the same. You keep students at the center, build momentum at every stage and turn out your base.

Key Documents:

- [Municipality's Council Meeting Guide](#)
- [Campaign Milestone and Stakeholder Tracker](#)

If you need help figuring out your municipality's process, please connect with your municipal clerk, or reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njisj.org.

STEP 4 – Implementing the Ordinance

Passing the ordinance is just the beginning. Turning expanded voting rights into reality requires early coordination with officials at every level, including municipal, county and state.

That starts with making sure everyone knows the ordinance passed. The municipal clerk should promptly send written notice to the County Clerk, County Board of Elections and New Jersey’s Division of Elections, including the effective date and any relevant election deadlines.

From there, successful implementation depends on clear communication and thoughtful planning in four key areas: working with election officials, registration and ballot design, outreach and education, and overall timeline coordination.

Work with Election Officials

Begin by setting up a joint conversation between the municipality, county and state. Each of these partners plays a unique and essential role in putting Vote16 into practice:

- The Secretary of State’s Office (Division of Elections) must update the Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) so that newly eligible voters can register and are flagged as eligible for local races only. They will only be able to vote in the specific local election authorized by the ordinance that was passed.
- County election officials are responsible for implementing those changes on the ground – processing registrations, designing ballots, training poll workers and counting votes.
- Municipality or school board clerks often help manage local outreach and the logistics around voter communication.

These steps are interconnected. While municipalities may lead on outreach or passing the ordinance, only the state’s Division of Elections can make the technical updates that allow registration for those under 18. Municipalities and counties cannot act alone – state action is the necessary first step. Until the SVRS is updated to reflect the new voter eligibility, registration forms from 16- and 17-year-olds cannot be processed, even if submitted.

Key Documents:

- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)
- [Election Official Contact Guide](#)

Registration and Ballot Planning

Once the system is updated, local planning can begin. In many spring school board elections, there is usually only one race on the ballot, so ballots for 16- and 17-year-olds will be the same as those for older voters. However, in November general elections, when multiple races appear, separate ballots will be needed so that under-18 voters only receive the races they are eligible to vote in. While the voter roll itself does not change, the ballot must clearly reflect those eligibility limits in an accessible way.

This might sound complicated, but with early coordination, it's entirely manageable.

Newark has already registered more than 2,000 eligible students, demonstrating that once the system is in place, young people are eager to participate. After the state updates its systems, the registration and voting process will look the same for 16- and 17-year-olds as it does for older voters. The only difference is that their ballots will include only the races they're eligible to vote in.

Key Documents:

- [Youth Registration and Turnout Tracker](#)
- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)

Outreach and Education

Equally important, even the best systems won't matter without strong public awareness. Sixteen and 17-year-olds need to know that they are eligible to vote and that a school board election is upcoming.

In Newark, although everything ran smoothly, organizers on the ground had only two months between the state system update and the voter registration deadline to finalize key voter information. That short window was not enough time to fully educate and engage new voters. The good news for future municipalities is that the voter eligibility framework is now in place, making it possible to begin outreach and education much earlier.

That early voter outreach will be critical. A successful rollout of this new ordinance depends on clear, proactive voter education among 16- and 17-year-olds, which might include:

- In-class presentations about registration and voting
- Know-your-rights cards or simple FAQ sheets
- Student-led outreach efforts in schools and neighborhoods

Newark students showed just how powerful that kind of young voter outreach can be. They organized rallies, forums and even Election Day interviews, demonstrating that the process of expanding the vote isn't just creating legal change, it's a real opportunity to deepen civic engagement.

Substantive Voter Education

Outreach efforts should go beyond simply notifying young people of their right to vote. They should also include messaging about why voting matters, when the election is and how to participate – whether by mail or in person.

Just as importantly, students need to understand whom and what they're voting for. That means explaining what school boards actually do, such as how they shape curriculum, set district policies, hire superintendents, approve budgets and address issues like school safety and facilities. In some towns, young voters may also be eligible to vote in municipal elections for mayor or city council, which carry power over city services, policing, parks, youth programming and more.

Equipping new voters with that context helps make voting feel meaningful and relevant. It also strengthens civic knowledge and fosters a deeper connection to local government. Flyers like the one created in Newark (see **Flyers and Fact Sheets** for reference), which clearly explains the impact of school board decisions and lists key dates and voting options, can be a helpful model moving forward.

Key Documents:

- [Flyers and Fact Sheets](#)
- [Social Media and Event Toolkit](#)
- [Talking Points](#)
- [Student Voices One-Pager](#)
- [Op-Ed and Letter Templates](#)
- [Outreach Scripts and Peer Engagement Guide](#)

Timeline and Coordination

Finally, remember to give yourself enough time throughout the entire process. Coordination with state and county officials typically begins after the Vote16 ordinance is passed, so it's important to plan ahead and work backwards from your target election date. Most municipalities should aim to pass the ordinance at least six months before the next local election.

This timeline allows for:

- Transmitting the ordinance to the appropriate state and county offices
- Updating the voter registration system
- Launching outreach and education campaigns
- Training poll workers and preparing ballots
- Conducting Get Out the Vote efforts and voter registration drives

To keep things on track, municipalities should appoint a clear point of contact, ideally a staff member in the mayor's office or clerk's office who can manage communication and ensure no steps are missed.

Key Documents:

- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)
- [Media and Outreach Tracker](#)
- [Campaign Milestone and Stakeholder Tracker](#)

If you need help along the way, reach out to the **Institute's Vote16 Team** at justice@njsj.org. We can assist with drafting letters, coordinating with the state and mapping out your implementation timeline.

PART III.

**Winning at the Ballot Box:
Voter Engagement and
Getting out the Vote (GOTV)**



Passing a law is only half the battle – now it’s time to make sure young people show up to cast their ballots. When young people vote, they send a powerful message: we’re here and we’re paying attention.

This section walks you through how to register 16- and 17-year-olds to vote and turn out young voters when Election Day arrives.

STEP 5 – Turning New Voters into Active Voters

Kicking Off Voter Registration

Once 16- and 17-year-olds are eligible to vote in your community, the next critical step is making sure they are registered.

But voter registration isn’t just about handing out forms – it’s an opportunity to start building up a culture of civic engagement and pride in your school and community. Think of registration not as a one-time event, but as the launch of a voter engagement campaign with multiple phases.

Start with a Kickoff Moment

Plan a visible and celebratory launch event to generate excitement and awareness. Young people should have a sense that there is something special about becoming eligible to vote at 16.

A kickoff event could include:

- A voter registration pep rally with music, student speakers and local influencers
- An announcement over the school system or in homeroom explaining the new voting rights for young people
- “I Registered to Vote” sticker giveaways and selfie stations to celebrate young people who sign up
- A visit from a guest speaker (like a city council member or young activist) to inspire action

Make It Easy and Accessible

Young people are more likely to register when it’s simple and available right where they are.

- Embed registration opportunities into the school-day and social activities:
 - Set up a table in the cafeteria, school hallway or during a school fair

- o Visit classrooms (especially social studies or government classes) and walk students through the process
- o Use QR codes or tablets to access the online voter registration form and have them register then and there
- Make sure to explain the process clearly – what forms of ID are accepted, where to turn in forms and when registration closes

Partner with Student Groups

Youth-led, peer-to-peer outreach is the most effective way to reach new voters.

Work with clubs, teams and organizations that already bring students together:

- Collaborate with student government, National Honor Society, Black Student Union or other groups to co-host events
- Ask club officers to take a leadership role in spreading the word and helping peers register
- Offer incentives or recognition for clubs that get the most members registered

Infuse it with Culture and Fun

Make voter registration an exciting and memorable experience, not a chore. Include music, snacks, photo booths or other incentives to draw students in, such as:

- Raffles for those who register or pledge to vote
- Giveaways like custom pins, t-shirts or stickers
- A music playlist curated by students playing in the background



Governor Phil Murphy, state and local officials and rapper A Boogie Wit da Hoodie joined students at the Newark School of Data Science to celebrate young people voting and register students to vote ahead of the school board election.

Courtesy of Governor's Office

Track and Celebrate Progress

Track how many students have registered to build momentum and encourage others to join.

Share this progress with your school and community by:

- Creating a public poster or digital tracker showing progress toward your registration goal
- Recognizing milestones during morning announcements or on social media
- Celebrating when you reach big targets (e.g., 100 students registered)

Planning High-Impact GOTV Events

GOTV is about energy, repetition and accessibility. Your goal is to create touchpoints and moments that make voting exciting and achievable for young people.

Successful GOTV events should be:

- *Highly visible*: Use school-wide announcements, hallway posters and assemblies to make voting unavoidable
- *Social and celebratory*: Turn out voters with music, food, photo booths and public recognition
- *Peer-powered*: Mobilization is most effective when it's friend-to-friend. Create squads or teams that commit to voting together and bringing others to the polls

Ideas to consider:

- A school-wide "Get Out the Vote" rally
- Voter pledge drives with prizes
- "Ballot drop walks" to deliver vote-by-mail ballots to local drop boxes
- Class competitions with pizza parties for the highest participation
- Early voting or Election Day countdown posters in the school hallway



The Vote16 Rock the Block Party brought Newark's young people together for music, food, art and action – celebrating young people's power to shape their future.

Mobilizing Through Digital Outreach

Your online strategy should focus on engagement over broadcasting. Instead of pushing out information, use digital tools to spark interaction, build community and move community members to take action.

Core Tactics for Digital Outreach

Direct Messaging and Texting

- Equip student leaders to send personalized reminders to their peers via direct messages, texts or chat apps
- Use relational organizing platforms like Reach or Movement to organize voter outreach lists
- Peer-to-peer texts are more trusted and more likely to be read than mass emails or robo-texts

Visual Content for Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat

- Create countdown graphics to the registration deadline or election day
- Use filters, memes and popular trends to frame messages in a youth-friendly way
- Share behind-the-scenes videos from your events or organizing meetings to humanize the campaign

Shareable GOTV Content

- Make graphics with how to vote instructions, school-specific voting dates and motivational quotes
- Host an “Instagram Live” or TikTok question and answer session with young organizers answering common voting questions
- Encourage students to create their own content explaining why they’re voting and tag their friends

Group Chats and Micro-Communities

- Start or tap into school-based group chats on platforms like WhatsApp, GroupMe or Discord
- Assign “GOTV captains” in each chat who are responsible for sharing key reminders and links
- Consider running a friendly competition between group chats or schools based on engagement

Email and Link-in-Bio Tools

- Use a simple email list or newsletter for weekly updates to students, teachers and community allies
- Build a Linktree or Carrd page with everything in one place: registration links, FAQs, voting deadlines and event RSVP forms

Best Practices for Digital Outreach

- Keep it short. People scroll fast – make every word count.
- Ask young people what they want to see. Let them drive the tone and design.
- Use bright, bold visuals. Youth-led graphics go further than polished, corporate-looking designs.
- Post often, but with intention. Quality over quantity.
- Always include a clear call to action (CTA): “Register here,” “DM us to get involved,” “Tag three friends.”

STEP 6 – Sustaining the Momentum

Measuring the Impact

Tracking your campaign’s results helps you improve, celebrate and make the case for expanding young people voting for other offices. You should collect two types of data: quantitative and qualitative, to measure your impact on civic engagement.

Quantitative Metrics

- How many young people registered to vote?
- What was the turnout for young people (if available)?
- How many GOTV conversations or pledges did you collect?
- How many schools, clubs or students were reached?
- How many social media views or press mentions did you receive?

Qualitative Metrics

- What did students say about voting for the first time?
- What did teachers or administrators notice?
- Were there any unexpected wins or barriers?
- For students who didn’t vote – why did they not vote?

Create a short impact report with charts, testimonials and photos. Share with partners, elected officials, media and potential funders to build continued support.

Tip: Make a feedback form for every event and encourage young people to write journal entries or video reflections about what the experience meant to them.

Keeping Young Voters Engaged

Voting should be the beginning of a civic journey, not the end.

Keep young voters engaged by creating long-term pathways for involvement:

- Host post-election celebrations or reflection events to process what happened, share lessons learned and recognize contributions
- Offer continued leadership roles through youth advisory councils, event planning committees or speaker opportunities
- Connect young people to ongoing local issues, like the school budget, education policy, public safety and climate justice – where they can use their voice and organizing power
- Help engaged young people support their friends in other municipalities who are interested in lowering the voting age in their area
- Maintain year-round organizing spaces like a Vote16 club or civics club that meets regularly and trains new student leaders each semester

Tip: Introduce an annual Vote16 Leadership Award or “Young Civic Leader of the Year” recognition to incentivize and celebrate continued engagement.

You can use this section to plan your voter registration and turnout efforts in a way that fits your school and community, and if you need support, the **Institute’s Vote16 Team** is always here to help at justice@njisj.org.

PART IV.

Your Vote16 Toolkit



You've now seen the full campaign arc – from building a team, to passing a law, to turning out young voters. This section gives you the resources to make it happen.

It's your one-stop shop for running a successful Vote16 campaign. Use what's here as-is or adapt it to fit your community. You'll find sample ordinances, outreach templates, planning guides, media tools and more – all designed to save you time and keep your campaign on track.

Training and Preparation

To organize meetings with municipal councilmembers, school district superintendents or young leaders, you can rely on these materials:

- [One-on-One Meetings Prep and Guide](#)
- [Talking Points](#)
- [Municipal Council Meeting Guide](#)
- [Council Presentation Template](#)

In addition, you can learn directly from resources created by students:

- [Advice on Speaking at Council Meetings](#)
- [Breakdown of the Ordinance](#)

These documents make it easier to coordinate and communicate without starting from scratch.

Outreach and Communication Tools

These materials help you raise awareness, engage local media and keep the message youth-centered and community-focused. They're also helpful if you decide to form a mini-coalition or organizing team to lead local efforts.

To spread the word and build support, here are:

- [Email Templates for Outreach](#)
- [Op-Ed and Letter Templates](#)
- [Social Media and Event Toolkit](#)
- [Flyers and Fact Sheets](#)
- [Coalition Meeting Guide: Sample Agendas; Notes; Follow-up Emails](#)
- [Student Voices One-Pager](#)
- [Outreach Scripts and Peer Engagement Guide](#)

And resources from youth leaders themselves:

- [Impact of Voting at 16](#)
- [Dos and Don'ts](#)
- [Vote16 Communications Guide](#)
- [Vote16NJ Local Movement Quotes](#)

- [Youth Voting FAQ](#)
- [The ABCs of Vote16 New Jersey Tabling](#)

Legal and Implementation Resources

Each campaign needs to loop in the right people early. And once your ordinance passes, implementation is just as important.

Here are some helpful documents:

- [Legal Overview: Authority and Process](#)
- [Implementation Checklist and Follow-Up Guide](#)
- [New Jersey Election Official Contact Guide](#)
- [Sample Voter Information - Factsheet: Newark School Board Election Factsheet](#)

All are built to help young voters feel confident and prepared.

Ready-to-Use Ordinance Templates

Here you can find ordinance templates for:

- [Sample Municipal Ordinance Template](#)
- [Sample School Board Ordinance Template](#)
- [Sample Joint Ordinance Template](#)

Each version has been legally vetted and reflects lessons learned from Newark and other municipalities. You can customize them based on your local government's structure or your campaign goals.

Campaign Strategy and Tracking

To measure your impact and improve your campaign, feel free to use and customize these tracking templates:

- [Campaign Plan Template](#)
- [Campaign Milestone and Stakeholder Tracker](#)
- [Media and Outreach Tracker](#)
- [Youth Registration and Turnout Tracker](#)

These materials will help you stay accountable, make adjustments and tell the story of your campaign's success. If you're not sure where to start, that's exactly what the Playbook is here for!

Once you've gotten your bearings, come back to this section to grab the resources you need! If you have questions or want support tailoring these tools to your municipality, reach out to the **Institute Vote16 Team** at justice@njisj.org.



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