Legislative sessions and gubernatorial state-of-the-state speeches in 2011 have brought more than the usual share of education governance proposals—some of which would have a devastating impact on the public’s voice in public school oversight through their elected or appointed state boards of education. In responding to far-reaching proposals in Oklahoma, Utah, Kansas, Oregon, and Washington State, NASBE has developed talking points that emphasize the positive role citizen boards play in state education governance. These have been incorporated into this month’s Commentary by NASBE’s Executive Director, Brenda Welburn.

NASBE welcomes submissions for new Commentaries, as well as responses to current articles. Please send all correspondence to David Kysilko, Director of Publications (davidk@nasbe.org).

Why State Boards of Education Are an Essential Part of Our Public Education System

by Brenda Lilienthal Welburn
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Every state constitution calls for a state system of public schools. A long tradition in American government is to delegate policymaking authority over education, within legislative or constitutional guidelines, to boards of education. Indeed, state boards of education date back to the early nineteenth century, when Horace Mann, widely known as the “father of public education,” was the chief advocate for the creation of a state education board in Massachusetts. Mann became its first leader when the board was established in 1837. Today, in our anxious education climate that seems to beg politicians to do something—anything—to advance school reform, political leaders sometimes seem to forget about this heritage of public input into the oversight of public education. But just what does this “public input” mean, and what does it bring to a state education system? Based on NASBE’s more than 50 years of working with state boards of education, following are some of the important and practical reasons why education governance should be in the hands of a policy board with defined responsibilities:

- **State Boards offer a broad vision and diverse perspectives** in terms of regions, cultures, race and ethnicity, and occupations. Boards provide a true statewide perspective that supports all students in the state. State board members continually receive input from parents, administrators, local school board members, and teachers within their districts that helps provide an “on the ground” perspective often missing from discussions within the state bureaucracy—and that can help predict unanticipated pitfalls and unintended consequences of otherwise attractive proposals.

- **State Boards help ensure public support for education initiatives.** A multi-member, broadly representative board makes it more likely that education proposals will be widely acceptable to the public. An education board can help
buffer governors and chief state school officers from controversy and free them from the details of education governance. State boards also play a key role in convening education stakeholders from across the state, ensuring broad buy-in for new policies.

- **Education is different from other divisions of state government.** There is a long tradition of citizen input in education—it’s much closer to everyone’s home than other state departments (such as the departments of natural resources, agriculture, or commerce), as well as being seen as vital to state and local economies. Everyone has a large stake in education. Also, education is much more subject to massive reforms and overhauls that go well beyond what generally occurs in other state government departments.

- **Education policy needs some, though not complete, sheltering from partisan politics.** Reforms and other initiatives take a long time to implement, evaluate, and refine. The time frames of governors and elected superintendents tend to be much shorter and are often based on election cycles. State boards, whose members have staggered and frequently longer terms, provide a sustained, coherent vision.

- **State Boards provide transparency.** Boards must make decisions in daylight through a deliberative process often accompanied by multiple opportunities for public and professional input. In the two states without boards, information about policy and rulemaking at the state level can be hard to come by—the decisions get embedded in the bureaucracy of the department. Or, as in the case of the state superintendent in Wisconsin adopting the Common Core standards, important decisions get made by one person.

- **State Boards provide focus on education.** State boards are the only entity whose sole responsibility is the oversight of the education system. A dedicated board that is able to focus on challenging issues in great depth is more likely to make informed decisions, adopt policies that are internally consistent and coherent, and provide continuity in oversight.

- **State Boards have a built-in accountability.** Because of their transparent decision making, broad representation, and singular focus on education mentioned above, state boards are generally very responsive to public, political, or professional calls to fix a problem or develop a new policy. Yet because of boards’ deliberative process, these responses tend not to be “knee jerk,” but well thought out and properly vetted.