Aggregating and Tracking State Board Policies

Policies are created by State Boards of Education in a variety of ways and for an array of reasons. Most commonly, Board policies respond to educational issues or needs within the state or to perceived educational crises. These issues come to the Board’s attention through study sessions on topics that impact schools and students, from issues brought to light by state and national trends and events, and from federal and state legislation.

Most policy initiatives are introduced and promoted with the best of intentions. Yet frequently, they are introduced without a comprehensive examination of what policies already exist regarding the issue being addressed or what the effectiveness of those policies has been. In recent years, these and other circumstances have increased the need for a comprehensive method for indexing and tracking state board policies. Most significantly, state legislatures’ escalating practice of passing legislation in concept, while leaving the specific details to be worked out by the State Board has had an impact on policies that are already operative in local districts. Membership changes in legislatures, among governors, and on Boards have also affected the institutional memory and record of policies, resulting in multiple—and sometimes conflicting—practices designed to address the same issues. Maintaining a Board Policy Manual has become an indispensable practice for State Boards that value continuity and accountability in state education governance.

NASBE consistently urges Boards to use policy manuals and review cycles to systematically evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of state board policies. A Board’s ability to effectively use a policy review cycle depends on how well the Board’s policies are tracked and maintained. Thus, an all-inclusive Board Policy Manual is a critical tool for aggregating and tracking state board policies. A serviceable Board Policy Manual is never complete and is always a work in progress. Those states with the most useful manuals have several common elements, including:

- **Introduction**
- **Policy Manual Index**
- **Clear Guidelines and Cross References**
- **Milestone Dates**

**Introduction**

A State Board Policy Manual should contain an introductory section that outlines the Board’s mission and goals as well as its general practices, policies, and procedures. The language should be clear and concise and classify the manual as a road map for locating information on a specific topic or policy. It should also note that the manual is a history of the Board’s actions on specific issues. The introduction can serve both as a vehicle for explaining the role and function of the Board in the continuum of education policy development and as an illustration of how the Board’s policies are designed to address the states’ educational interests.
Policy Manual Index

The method used for indexing the Board’s manual is important. It should be a user-friendly, alphabetical listing constructed according to issues or topics. Frequently, Boards use major headings or categories—such as personnel, fiscal, or instruction—followed by specific subcategories under each heading. Some states have worked with their state school boards’ association on a common indexing model to insure clarity and continuity between state and local policy manuals on the way specific topics are classified. The most important fact to keep in mind is that simplicity will make the manual more meaningful to those who use it.

Clear Guidelines and Cross Reference

Boards that use broad categories to delineate policies recognize that one policy may impact several areas or be applied to more than one topic. The delineation of policies should include cross references to related polices and topics in the manual. The description of the policy should include a short characterization of the intent of the policy and contain the actual policy language, the date of adoption, and the legislative reference, if any. If there are appropriate divisions within the state department of education that can be contacted for additional information, this can also be noted.

Milestone Dates

Boards should regularly review their rules, regulations, and policies. State Board policy manuals should include milestone dates for each policy that the public can easily understand, including date of adoption or enactment, a schedule for sunset or policy review actions, and any deadlines that local jurisdictions are required to meet. Using milestone dates keeps the public aware that the Board is a dynamic entity that is committed to review and policy examination.

Conclusion

The more information the Board can disseminate to interested parties about its work, the more support the Board will generate for its efforts. The Board Policy Manual is one essential tool for communicating with the Board’s constituencies, and it can be especially effective when used in conjunction with other dissemination methods, such as distribution of advisories when a new policy is adopted (or when an existing policy is scheduled for review) or the development of sample policies for local districts when companion policies are required. What is key is that comprehensive and essential material on Board policy should be easily accessible.

Groups outside of the state department of education and the Board do not always understand the purposes of the Board’s work and frequently undermine the Board’s efforts if they find it difficult to follow the Board’s logic. Developing a comprehensive Board Policy Manual and policy review cycle to examine all policies puts the Board’s hard work and oversight responsibilities clearly before the public and makes relevant information understandable and accessible to all interested parties.