State Board and Governor Relations

Relationships among state boards of education and their governors vary across the states and across governance structures. Changes in those relationships can occur with new board members, new governors, and new issues. Some assume that gubernatorial appointments naturally promote a good working relationship between a board and the governor’s office. This governance structure, however, is not always a predictor of a productive relationship. Boards sometimes find themselves at odds with governors who mistakenly assume that their appointed board will always support their positions. In reality, any effective state board can create and sustain a good working relationship with the governor, whatever the method of board selection. Such a relationship requires planning and frequent communication, but the benefits are well worth the effort. It is the responsibility of the board to communicate with the governor on the board’s goals and to identify common interests that the two can agree on and promote. When a positive working relationship exists between the governor and the board, the board is neither a rubber stamp body for promoting a governor’s agenda nor an antagonistic institution challenging the governor on her or his goals for education.

In recent years, some governors have moved to bypass the roles and responsibilities of boards. Others have shown well-deserved confidence in the board by supporting an expansion of the institution’s functions. The trend to usurp board authority is usually grounded in one or more of the following factors:

- The governor has philosophical differences with the board.
- The governor believes the board is moving too slowly to promote change.
- The governor believes responsibility for education should directly rest with the governor. This belief has been voiced more frequently over the last 10 to 15 years and sometimes includes higher education as well as K-12. It is usually accompanied by proposals to replace the board-appointed or independently elected chief state school officer with a secretary of education appointed by the governor.
- The governor and his or her staff lack of a clear understanding of how the board operates and develops policy.
- The governor and his or her staff do not understand or value the importance of lay leadership.

Even when there is a positive relationship between a board and a governor, the governor, his or her education aides, and the appointment personnel rarely know the depth and breadth of board work. Most assume the responsibility and work load of the board begins and ends with the board meeting. Few are aware of the voluminous reading piles, the hours of hearings and deliberation, or the multitude of invitations and expectations to participate in local school activities that consume board members’ time. Most often state board work is done as voluntary service to the state. Few understand how vested and committed individuals become to the importance of lay leadership in education or to the goal of improving education for all students. Given this fact, at least two elements must be in place if a board wants a good working relationship with the governor. The board must:

- Ensure the governor understands and values the work of the board, and
- Provide a vehicle for having the governor’s views presented before the board constructively.

The Board’s Role in Building a Positive Relationship with the Governor

A good working relationship between the board and the governor is grounded in ongoing and frequent communication between the two entities. This can even begin prior to a governor taking office: one board recently met with the major
candidates for governor well before the election to hear their views on education issues and establish a relationship. After inauguration, the board should use an agreed upon strategy to:

- **Convey the board’s goals and accomplishments to the governor and his or her staff regularly.** A board that does an annual self-evaluation and planning retreat should inform the governor’s office of the results.

- **Develop a structured liaison relationship with the governor’s office.** The board chair or his or her designee should have regular meetings with the governor’s education aide to ensure that both understand where there is agreement and where there is a divergence of views on major education issues facing the state.

- **Ensure that there are “no surprises.”** The governor should not learn of new policies, fractious issues, or other board concerns from individuals outside the board. When someone else is interpreting the works of the board, there are bound to be misinterpretations.

- **Incorporate the governor’s priorities into the board’s priorities when possible.** Most boards and governors have similar goals for education. The challenge develops when the methods for achieving those goals differ. Boards and governors that have a constructive relationship look for common ground and find ways to support one another’s agendas.

### The Governor’s Role in Building a Positive Relationship with the Board

As chief executive officer, the governor is ultimately responsible for the programs and services that benefit the citizens of the state. However, the governor should recognize that no other body in the state spends as much time and effort solely on education policy as the state board of education. The governor should respect and value the work done by the board. The governor has a responsibility to:

- Communicate with the board;
- Make him or herself aware of the board’s goals and time lines for achieving those goals;
- Respect the statutory and/or constitutional responsibilities of the board; and
- Ensure there are “no surprises.”

For states with appointed boards, the appointment process is one of the most important decisions a governor can make for education in the state. The governor should consider the needs of the board as it currently exists. The governor’s education aide should talk to the board chair and the superintendent or commissioner about the current makeup of the board and what kinds of individuals would complement the body. When making appointments, a governor should:

- Carefully evaluate the current strengths and weaknesses on the state board of education and appoint individuals who will strengthen the board and broaden its vision;
- Ensure that parents, business, and community interests are adequately represented on the board;
- Include individuals from diverse racial and ethnic populations within the state to serve on the state board; and
- Be prepared to let the body govern.

### Conclusion

The nature of boards and governors dictate that there will always be creative differences on how to best solve the state’s pressing education problems. A mutual respect for both institutions can go a long way toward producing solutions. Changing governance structures, avoiding honest discussions, and working at odds will not. Putting aside distracting issues and the battle of ideas that rage about us, policymakers must step back, look at the whole picture, and work to establish steady, nonpartisan, representative leadership that earnestly tackles difficult education challenges.